

######

D 805.I8 S70

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON



00453452

Hartley Library

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

Date due for return (Unless recalled for another reader)

--	--	--



BRIAN STONE

PRISONER FROM ALAMEIN



PRISONER FROM ALAMEIN

by
BRIAN STONE

*"Heureux qui, comme Ulysse,
a fait un beau voyage."*

H. F. & G. WITHERBY
326 HIGH HOLBORN, LONDON, W.C.

First published 1944



MA



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN

*Printed for H. F. & G. Witherby Ltd.
by Northumberland Press Limited
Gateshead on Tyne*

To
MY FRIENDS
EDMOND AND NINA EZRI
OF ALEXANDRIA

INTRODUCTION

THE first purpose of this Introduction is to supplement the author's brief preface with a few facts about him. These are irrelevant to the story he tells so vividly of his falling desperately wounded into German hands at El Alamein in July 1942 and afterwards of his life as a prisoner in Italian hospitals; but they are not irrelevant to the interest in himself which his account of what he suffered, saw and thought, inevitably rouses in his readers. When an author has taken them so frankly into his confidence they want also to know a few facts about him, such as his age, where and how he was educated and what he did before he joined the Army, in his case the 5th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment. Yet it was not for him to supply such information. To have done so would have been to take for granted that his readers would be interested in himself as in his adventures; and although the form of his narrative is necessarily autobiographical, Autobiography was far from his intention. It has therefore properly been left to another to supply such simple facts.

True, we come to know him well in the course of reading this book; but that inevitably happens whenever a man can describe well what he has been through, and especially when those experiences have brought him close up to pain, exile and death. As we read we may wonder how humour and alert observation can survive such circumstances; wonder, in spite of knowing that "It is common". What is not common, however, is the power to record such things, and to this power I, as a reader of many books, here testify.

It is deeply interesting to those who are trying to keep in touch through the imagination with prisoners of war, to hear what may bring relief to them or again give an extra turn to the screw to their sufferings, and to learn something about the behaviour of the Enemy to them. Captain Stone has an eye for character, both individual and national. He owed his life to the chivalry of German soldiers who saved him at the

risk of their own. He is also a man to whom music has given glimpses of heaven, and therefore a man to whom German music has meant more than much. He has not experienced himself organized German brutality. On the other hand he suffered and saw others suffering acutely from Italian callous inefficiency; "there is a point", he says, "at which inefficiency becomes criminal negligence." His portraits are living, his descriptions of surroundings vivid, and the temper of his narrative admirably and even sternly truthful. His psychological notation of such exceptional moments as lying in hospital while our bombs are falling, the opening of prison doors, and the return to England are remarkable. But I will not trespass on the ground of the reviewer.

Captain Stone was unknown to me when, a few months ago, he brought me his manuscript, which I consented to read with more reluctance than I showed. But soon I was grateful. Here are the few facts which I learnt about him subsequently, and his readers may be glad to know.

He was educated at Taunton, Somerset, and after leaving school spent two years working in the City. On the outbreak of war, being in a Territorial Regiment, the Westminster Dragoons, he was called up at once and was commissioned to the Royal Tank Regiment in March 1940 at the age of twenty. He was posted to the 5th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, and went to France with them in May, to be evacuated from St. Malo at the fall of France.

In October 1940 the regiment left for the Middle East and took part in all the desert campaigns. During the first retreat in front of the Germans Captain Stone brought back the only remaining tank of the Army into Tobruk. At the end of the last retreat, from Gazala to El Alamein, which is described in one of the chapters of his book, he was taken prisoner.

He was repatriated through Lisbon in April, 1943, and released from the Army in November.

DESMOND MACCARTHY.

PREFACE

For a young man war is usually a series of exciting and possibly pleasant adventures, and so it was with me. France and a year and a half of the Western Desert with the 5th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment gave me much excitement and pleasure. This book is the record of my last adventure, the summer retreat of 1942 and the period after it which I spent as a prisoner.

The reader I have in mind is the one who knows a prisoner of war and is interested to know what sort of experience he has had, hence the recording of the enemy's attitude towards us and the accounts of living conditions on every occasion. Apart from one or two famous figures, I have withheld the names of people who are still prisoners, and I have made no adverse criticism of prisoners' behaviour, for obvious reasons.

My attitude towards the enemy is only incidental to the book. Perhaps I have let my justifiable bitterness towards the Italians obscure the fact that I consider them to be a race of no consequence.

In a book on such a subject, a remark on the censoring authorities is not out of place. The reader will be glad to know he has the whole story.

B.E.S.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. LIKE LITTLE WANTON BOYS	11
II. TRAVAILS WITH A SKELETON	16
III. ON THE VERGE OF DEATH	23
IV. TO TOBRUK	31
V. SIX PERSONAGES	45
VI. IN TOBRUK HARBOUR	53
VII. RETROSPECT	55
VIII. SMELL NAPLES AND DIE	92
IX. CELEBRITIES, SIGHTS AND VIEWS	104
X. THE LONG REST BEGINS	116
XI. THE EIGHT QUIET MONTHS (i)	122
XII. THE EIGHT QUIET MONTHS (ii)	158
XIII. THE OPENING OF THE PRISON	172
XIV. RETROSPECT BEFORE FREEDOM	181
XV. FREEDOM	187

ILLUSTRATIONS

BRIAN STONE	<i>. frontispiece</i>
THE PARTY FOR REPATRIATION	<i>facing p. 166</i>
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FAIR	<i>. 167</i>
PLAN OF TOBRUK AREA	<i>on end paper</i>



I

"Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders."

EL ALAMEIN, 6th July, 1942. We had handed over our tanks at the Egyptian frontier towards the end of June after fighting every day since the 27th May, and had motored back to Amriya by easy stages well to the south of the hectic retreat, hunting gazelle by day and resting at night. Now we had some new tanks, and our spirits were very high. Jerry had attacked the moment he arrived at El Alamein, and had failed, as we had known he would. Already extravagant myths were abroad concerning the numbers of twenty-five-pounders which were supposed to be roaming the front almost at a loss for targets, and the air was gloriously and superbly ours, as it had been ever since the battle began. The twinkling, grilling desert was inert except for small energetic parties of British artillerymen who spent all their days ranging on little hazy skyline groups of Germans who hopped and scattered like rabbits startled in the moonlight.

Before dawn I moved out into the mist with my troop of light tanks to my point of observation, picking up as I went two rather bewildered Germans who must have lost their way, as they were without arms. Contacting the enemy in the morning mist is always a tricky and frightening business, and the sight of these two men within fifty yards set my eyes frantically looking for the inevitable anti-tank gun. However, all was well, and as I approached the spot from which I had observed the enemy the day before, the mist lifted mercifully, and sure enough, there on my beat was one of the hardy artillerymen, sitting on top of his light tank, watching a little ridge two thousand yards away where tiny figures were hopping from time to time. I left one of my tanks in a small dip watching the area of my patrol, then I joined the gunner, and we sat and watched and talked and wondered how we could annoy Jerry.

The position was strange. A long, low ridge ran from north

to south, with ourselves on its eastern side and the Germans on the western slopes except for the southern end, where they had managed to dig in on a less exposed part of the top, and it was this group of Germans which attracted us. The gunner said that it was impossible to go farther west from where we were, because we should be immediately shot at by two guns down in the valley which were quite invisible. I tested out this statement two or three times, and although I strained my eyes as the solid shot whistled past, I was unable to see anything or do anything useful, so we both came to the conclusion that it was far more fun putting shells down on Germans we could see than acting as coconut-shies for nasty Germans we could not see. So for some time we sat there, this strange gunner from another brigade and I; and whenever Hans on our little ridge wanted to talk to Karl, or get out of his slit trench for any other purpose, four beautiful cracks went off a mile behind us, four beautiful whistling birds flew over our heads, four beautiful clouds of dust obscured Hans and Karl, and we two chortled and decided life was grand. It was eight o'clock. The sun laid warm hands on our backs, the wind moved faintly in our shirts. At nine o'clock Geoffrey Rawlins was coming to relieve me, and I would go back to the squadron area and cook some of the good things I had in the tank for breakfast, notably four eggs we had purchased from an Arab at El Hammam on the way up three days before. Till then—

"Well," said I, "I'll work my way round to our friends, and see how near I can get to where your shells are dropping."

"O.K.," replied the gunner, "and when you come back perhaps you'll be able to tell me exactly how near they are dropping?"

"Yes. Cheerio!"

I worked round in our valley, and after going about half a mile south, I suddenly found a re-entrant going towards the enemy position, deep enough to conceal my tank. I went to the end of it, and cautiously, oh so very cautiously, more cautiously than the madman opened the lantern on to the

sleeping old man's eye in Poe's story of the Tell-tale Heart, I peered over the top.

Oh, how clever I was! There, not two hundred yards away, was a fifty-millimetre anti-tank gun pointing straight at me, and fifteen yards away from it were the crew, frolicking over their breakfast in their slit trenches. To the left of them there was nothing except a machine-gun or two, but as I looked carefully to the right I was not so sure. Something that might have been a light gun limber was just poking over the ridge. Anyway, I knew that this was the dangerous flank. I stayed there for about five minutes and watched the beautiful birds dive into the ground both in front of and behind the slit trenches, so that was all right. Before I came away I let off about two hundred and fifty rounds of machine-gun fire at the ducking heads and shoulders in front of me, and went back to my gunner friend in a state of high jubilation.

I found him with yet another gunner, also strange to me, who was roaming the front in a slightly more antiquated vehicle, and he also had been shelling our anti-tank gun crew. What? Eight guns firing at one spot, and I could get within two hundred yards of it without being seen? The whole thing was just too simple! How nice to bring back a German anti-tank gun intact! But what fools the Germans were! Our instructions had been to observe and not be offensive, so I rang up Richard, my squadron commander, and asked what he thought about it. He asked the colonel, and they were both in favour of a little party.

Nine o'clock. Geoffrey arrived with his troop of tanks to relieve me, looking disgustingly well fed, and wearing a regulation pullover although it was already boiling hot. I said to him, "Will you do this thing?" so he replied, "Yes," and I said, "Well, we'll both do it, and I'll go off and have breakfast afterwards." Just then Richard rang me up, and told me not to start until he came, as he wanted to see the fun. He arrived a few moments later, and I assembled our tank crews to tell them what was to be done and how we were to do it. Geoffrey and I had two tanks each, while Richard was to be a spectator. Both troops of guns were to open fire as we left

the re-entrant. I was to lead and make straight for the fifty-millimetre gun, and cover Geoffrey while he attached one end of his tow-rope to it. The other end of the rope was already shackled to the back of his tank. My sergeant was to do right flank protection, Geoffrey's sergeant left flank. We expected no trouble from the German machine-gunners, and as it turned out, we were right.

So we moved slowly up the valley, very slowly so as not to warn Jerry of our approach by raising dust clouds, and sat for a minute or two ten yards below the abrupt rise at the end; four light tanks for surprise and assault, two gunners to observe and control the barrage, and Richard to father the affair and use his H.E. mortar on any wily German not ducking from shell-fire. After a minute Richard nodded across to me, I waved my hand, and the thing was on.

We raced across the intervening two hundred yards, machine-gunning madly at the scurrying figures in front, who all ran away at top speed, leaving their gun unattended. I arrived at the gun, first by fifty yards, and there, not twenty yards ahead of me, was a wall of bursting twenty-five-pounder shells. At that moment the belt in my machine-gun came to an end, and the tommy-gun which I had been firing from the top of the turret jammed. I was just watching my gunner change the belt when we were hit, and both my legs went numb. I looked down into the tank, and saw nothing moving. I pushed up on my hands, dropped on to the back of the tank among the broken petrol boxes we kept for firewood, and from there I dropped six feet on to the ground on my behind. I saw that one of my legs was shot off below the knee, and the other had three largish holes, one of them on the shinbone and another on the side of the knee. The tank was hit again; it rocked back towards me where I lay by the engine doors, terrified lest they should burst open if the tank caught fire. Geoffrey arrived, also brandishing his tommy-gun, head and shoulders out of his tank. He stopped, and jumped out to pick me up. His hands were just under my arm-pits when I heard a whirr by my head, and a hole appeared in the side of his tank, followed by a loud scream which his gunner gave

before leaping out and fainting on the ground. Geoffrey went over to him.

Funny, too many things round my neck, felt a bit stifled, so I took off my binoculars and laid them on the ground. A German rushed forward and picked them up, running away at once as the artillery was shelling us heavily. I said to Geoffrey, "This is a f—— lark, isn't it?" And he replied, "Yes. It wasn't Richard's fault, was it?" I said, "No, he couldn't do anything about it"—and after a pause—"I'm going to get into this gunpit to get away from this bloody shelling." "D'you want any help?" "No, I can manage." I had about ten yards to crawl on my two hands and behind. On the way I looked over my shoulder and saw Geoffrey's sergeant's tank burning merrily thirty yards away, and two of the crew being taken, unharmed, by Germans. Geoffrey pulled his operator out of the tank, and put him in a scoop in the ground for shelter; and then he did the immortal thing. Alone in the German position, surrounded by burning tanks, bodies and wounded men, under heavy artillery fire from our own guns, he decided to take on the German infantry with the sole weapon left to him, his tommy-gun. Lying down by the front of his tank and using it as cover, he fought single-handed against an entrenched and numerous enemy (for all the Germans had come back when the tanks were knocked out) until he was killed. Noble and unquestioning Geoffrey! In civilization a delightful and heavy-drinking reveller, in training at base a well-meaning and rather inefficient officer, in quiet days in the desert a slightly comic and dear figure padding absorbedly through the dust, in battle a stern and resolute opportunist who filled lulls with his laughter and a fascinating ingenuity in procuring luxurious foods for himself and his crew, and in death a figure whose awful acceptance of the highest creed makes men gasp whenever I tell his story. As I lay there I watched burning on the back of his tank a broken-down sofa he had picked up somewhere in the desert. "You see, after a day's battle I like to drink my whisky sitting down comfortably, but in the morning I don't mind drinking it standing up."

II

*"Wanderers eastward, wanderers west,
Know you why you cannot rest?
'Tis that every mother's son
Travails with a skeleton."*

FUNNY, how hot it must have been, as I could tell by looking at the sun and glare! Yet I wasn't hot. My God—flies. I couldn't see any, but the thought of them crawling in my wounds was too much for me, so I looked about for something with which to cover my legs. I was lying by the right wheel of the German gun, and on the left wheel was a light canvas cover which I might reach if I stretched across the front of the gunplate. Good! It wasn't fastened to anything! I dragged it across and spread it over my lower half, leaving one part loose to cover my head in case I felt too hot. There was just time after hearing the quadruple reports of the twenty-five-pounders to lie flat before the shells actually landed, but I didn't do this all the time, as I distinctly remember hearing metal tinkle on the gunplate just beside my head. I supposed they were continuing the shelling in an attempt completely to destroy the tanks, but I was wrong, because a German officer came to me at considerable risk to himself and said in English, "It is not fair. We are trying to get up our Red Cross armoured car to help you, and your artillery is shelling it." So I laughed and said, "You're telling me it's not fair."

By this time I was only interested in my own salvation, and as the Germans seemed to offer me the best hope of this, I put my trust and faith in them. I was in no pain, and fully conscious. The fact that my right leg was not there worried me not at all, indeed I remember thinking of it lying in the tank, and the waste of the brand-new desert boot on it which I had bought in Alexandria a few days before.

After a minute or two I heard a rattle behind me, and craning my neck round the back of the wheel, I saw to my horror a German loading the gun. "Hey, you can't fire that gun!"

I cried. "You'll kill me if you do." "They're coming again! They're coming again!" he panted, frantically trying to work the breech, which seemed to have jammed. "No, they're not!" I said, just as frantic as he, because I knew that as I was lying in front of the gunplate the blast of the discharge would kill me. I suppose what he saw was Richard, just having a look to try and ascertain what had happened. I remember thinking at the time what a swine I was, hoping as I did that no British attack would interfere with my rescue, for although I was quite indifferently disposed towards the sporadic shelling, the thought of some fiend in a tank machine-gunning my present haven from close range turned my blood cold. I consoled myself with the thought that at least I was putting off the German gunlayer from firing accurately at Richard, even if my motive was not correct. Richard must have gone, because the rattling and panting stopped and Jerry went back to his slit trench.

Quiet. Three slow grey funeral columns of smoke were curling musingly upwards from our ridiculous tanks. I remember hoping the artillery observation officer would not change his range by even five yards in an attempt to hit the tanks, because one gun was landing its shells twenty yards in front of me, and the other three were landing them just the other side of my tank down the slope. Thank heaven the twenty-five-pounder is such an accurate gun! I ceased to anticipate shell bursts. Guttural voices in the trenches behind me—I wondered if we had stilled any of them for ever. Hulloo! A German water-bottle beside me, full of ersatz coffee. I drank the lot, and wondered whether the owner would be annoyed. Now I was going to be taken prisoner in a few minutes, I thought, and I remembered I had the new codes in my notebook. Deliberately and lovingly I tore them up, holding a few pieces at a time in my hand and waiting for a little gust of wind before releasing them. There! My notebook had nothing in it but blank sheets, and I had even emptied the cardboard pocket in the cover. I kept only a photograph of Nina, taken in the main street of Luxor. My watch was still going, and I looked at it from time to time.

It was after eleven o'clock, and the thing had happened fifteen minutes ago.

I was by myself. Geoffrey's tank was fifteen yards away, and in front of it lay a body, which I took to be Geoffrey's gunner's, but as I met him in Italy six months later, it must have been Geoffrey himself. I was getting a little light-headed, and my thoughts ran from England to Egypt and up and down my life's events like waters flooding a land of low-lying and intricate valleys.

A sudden patter of feet and three Germans appeared, one with a large white flag with a red cross on it and two with a stretcher. They had barely reached me when the diabolical gunner in the eastern valley muttered "Fire!" into his microphone, and my would-be rescuers ran away to take cover. How good they were, these Germans, trying to save me! I wondered if they knew Beethoven's symphonies as well as I did, and should I sing them some of dear Ludwig's favourite melodies? I found singing very exhausting. Time passed, and the patter of feet was heard again, which made me think of the White Rabbit in *Alice*, God knows why. More shells, and they ran away with loud exclamations.

Half-past twelve. Indomitable men, here they came again, and fortunately the British gunner must have been looking the other way, because they succeeded in putting a tourniquet on my stump and tying me across the thighs with a greatcoat. The German who was adjusting the tourniquet nodded towards the body by Geoffrey's tank and asked if my comrade was dead. I told him "Yes", and he said, "It is good"—not meaning "Hurray, one less bloody Englishman," I divined, but just intimating in a sensitive way that there was enough suffering going on without my comrade being alive and in agony. They were just ready to take me away when some Englishman somewhere awoke; and before they could lift me on to the stretcher more shells came whistling and crashing round us, covering us with swirling dust and fumes. The smoke drifted away, and again I was alone. I thought how idiotic it was. There was a British gunner, who revered the Red Cross, observing from too great a distance for him to

see the flag, crashing destruction on to the three men who were doing their damndest for a fallen enemy. Yet all he saw through his glasses was a group of tiny enemy scuffling round a microscopic anti-tank gun. "The bastards!" he probably thought. "I'll stop them repairing that gun. They knocked out four of our tanks this morning too." (My own sergeant's tank, the fourth, on the right, had been the first to be hit.) Like Edgar at the end of *King Lear*, I felt that it was all very bootless.

A few minutes passed, and a single German crawled up to me. "It's no use," he said. "We can't get you away." I agreed, and said, "Get me some water from my tank, and come back again to-night." Without a moment's hesitation he stood upright and ran over to my tank, and began fumbling with a water-can. As he looked over his shoulder to ascertain from me that he had got the right can, I saw his face full of fear and apprehension glancing towards where he knew our gun position was. He came back with the water, for which I thanked him, and he left me. Another homage I pay every time I think of it.

Still not one o'clock, and now I was truly alone. But just behind me were all those kind Germans in their slit trenches, only waiting for a decent chance to rescue me. From time to time the little midday scurries of breeze and sand brought their voices to me. Ah, Germany, I thought, and German music, so incomparably better than that of any other nation! I thought I would sing them the theme from the choral movement of the Ninth Symphony, because they would be sure to know it and understand why I was singing it. I sang it two or three times at intervals, but I soon found I just hadn't the breath, so I gave it up. Shells were still dropping, almost noiselessly by this time, it seemed, for I was getting quite light-headed, and knew nothing better than the bliss of Beethoven's music.

After a while—I suppose it must have been nearly two o'clock—I heard someone approaching, and a German appeared, crawling stealthily towards me. He crouched in the gunpit beside me, and then said in rather bad English,

"Hey, Tommy, you give me your address and we be friends after the war, yes?" I didn't quite like this direct approach, so I refused as vigorously as I could without being rude, and after pleading with me for a few minutes he crawled away again. I now tried to whistle the Ninth Symphony, but of course no sound came, and as a matter of fact I was not able to whistle for nearly a month afterwards. I kept feeling my pulse, which was becoming appreciatively weaker, but I had no fears about death and it did not occur to me yet that I might die.

Another German came to me. He spoke no English, just pointing at my wrist identity disc and saying, "Talisman. Talisman." This touched me a little because he did not need my yea or nay to become master of it, and I let him have it, although it had "Ludwig" inscribed on the reverse side and was regarded by me as something of a lucky charm. He detached it gently, and retired cautiously and gratefully. Alone again.

The sun seemed to have moved an extraordinary distance across the sky since the thing had happened, and yet time had passed very quickly. Only, I knew I was getting weaker, and my thoughts became more and more remote from reality, soaring higher and higher into a phantasmagorical musical blissfulness where I could catch the melody and mood of any music I knew. Three o'clock. The stillness and seeming immutability of the situation began to oppress me, so that from time to time I cried out "Help!" when I heard the German voices. This was becoming too much of a good thing. I had drunk enormous quantities of water, pouring it from the water-can into the German water-bottle before drinking it. This I was strong enough to do the whole time I lay there, and I even had the sense to cover the water-can with a corner of the canvas cover to keep it cool. I thought I had drunk more water than any bladder could possibly hold, so although I did not feel the least desire to pass water I attempted the operation with a high seriousness. As I was sitting down and unable to move my legs it was rather difficult for me, and it struck me as comical that I should fail when I was obviously

blown out tight with liquid—not that I felt blown out tight, but my reason told me I must be. I gave up the effort, and relapsed into my musical thoughts.

Now at this stage, when I must have lost pints of blood and was certainly very weak, I did not give a single thought to anyone I had ever loved or known. I was solely occupied with music, and was even happy in the thought that if there were a life after death, I should be certain of meeting Beethoven. I thought of the difficulties people had had in personal contacts with him, and comforted myself with the idea that only his musical soul would be preserved after his physical death.

Four o'clock. The heat haze, which increases in the hottest part of the day in the desert and makes all things shimmer and all bushes and scrub appear in pools of burning light, was working on my side by obscuring visibility for the British gunners, for no shells had fallen for some time. Weaker, weaker. What a good thing the dust was soaking up the blood from my legs, because there was only a dull patch of red on the ground down there. Don't people write farewell messages when they are going to die? I thought I had better not flout convention. Besides, most of these Germans seemed to speak a little English, and I felt that if I did die I had better leave behind something they would appreciate. So I took out my pencil and wrote on the solid wheel of the fifty-millimetre gun, "If I die, I loved Beethoven," and signed it.

Soon after that, I heard the by now familiar patter of feet, and there appeared the two stretcher-bearers and the waver of the Red Cross flag. This time they were not interrupted, and I was lifted on to the stretcher and carried away into the valley. All the way down I watched the German with the flag, holding it as high as he could, and glancing apprehensively eastwards with eyes half closed by the glare. I was put on a captured truck, a Morris fifteen hundredweight, and driven slowly about half a mile to an ambulance, where my captors left me after putting me in a slit trench dug specially to accommodate a stretcher. A few shells were still dropping at intervals. Soon I was taken to the shady side of the ambulance, where the German M.O. came to attend to me. He

had a pith helmet and small glasses over a big strong face, and was dressed in very clean clothes. As he was leaning over me a shell exploded thirty yards behind my head, and he looked up, jutting out his lower lip as he did so.

Physically warm and in no pain, and at complete peace in my mind, knowing I was almost certainly delivered, my thoughts soared into an unimaginable tranquillity where only music reigned. I asked the doctor if he was fond of it, and whether he knew Beethoven. He replied that he had been in East Africa, that he played the violin and his wife the 'cello, and that they had had very pleasant musical evenings together out there. Complete peace. A Hurricane flew low over the ambulance, machine-gunning various surrounding vehicles, and the Germans stood stolidly and watched it. How slowly it seemed to be flying in that bluest of blue skies! I remember wondering if the Germans were aware of the fact that I was closely watching their reaction to air attack. In any case, none of the six or seven I could see made any attempt to take cover.

What a wonderful and beautiful existence! Everyone was looking after me, especially this kind strong doctor. He had opened a tin of English peaches, and was trying hard to make me eat some. I must have been very weak by this time, because I refused at first, and it was only after much perseverance that he made me swallow a few spoonfuls of juice. Then, a little later, when, I remember, I was not able to see very far, he kept putting his mouth close to my ear and saying urgently, "You are very strong. You are very strong. You have lost a lot of blood, you must drink a lot of water." Yes, of course I was very strong. How could I possibly die when I was being looked after so well? A glorious future unfolded before me, and the brightly coloured world lay at my feet. I was invincible, everyone would obey my wishes, which tended only to my own happiness and the beautification of my life. I was lifted into the ambulance and put on the operating table. In the midst of all the warmth and comfort a needle he inserted into my thigh brought a sharp sense of horror, but in answer to my eyes the doctor said slowly, "Yes. It is all right"—and I slipped quickly into oblivion.

III

"Through a kind of water-clearness, on the verge of death."

I AWOKE in the dark to an irregular rocking motion and the complaining of the engine in low gear. Machine-guns were crackling and rifles popping off, but I knew my rescuers would get away safely with me. I felt sure we went south and then turned west, although of course I could see nothing and had no reason for thinking so. It only shows that a long desert training makes one's sense of direction one of the primary instincts. There was the face of the doctor, who was bending over me. "Yes, it is all right. We are being attacked. It is quite all right." That was all I needed, so I dropped away from the harsh world once more.

I awoke again in bright sunlight as I was being tilted out of the ambulance. There was a new twenty-five-pounder quod which they were using as an ambulance, and I was put into this beside a German on another stretcher. The vehicle was not quite wide enough to take the length of a stretcher, so the door was left open with my head sticking out a few inches. I was naked except for blankets, and I asked them for my clothes, and my watch which had been taken from my wrist. Bloody fools! Did they think I was delirious and talking nonsense, taking no notice as they did? I wanted my watch and my clothes. There was that photograph of Nina, too. I didn't want any German to have that. Where was the kind strong doctor? He would see that I got my belongings. These oafish boys who wouldn't speak to me were no use.

We started off, and I suddenly realized that I was in pain. Every bump, and there were bumps every few yards, seemed to drag the dressings across the wounds on both legs, and my stump in particular was giving me hell. I moaned and protested the whole journey, which I imagined to be between eight and twelve miles in distance. The only mark on the

outside of the vehicle was a small black cross on the door, and I wondered whether we would be attacked by the R.A.F. Just beside my head the desert was jerking past in a sickening fashion, and I was afraid the door might get loose and swing shut on to my head. But the pain. The driver drove with a set face, and paid no attention to my moaning. I wondered how he knew the way, because he was not using a compass, and there was no one else with him.

At the dressing station I was put on the ground in a large Red Cross tent whose roof and sides were billowing whitely in the filtering sunlight. So cool and peaceful. After a short time I was carried into the operating theatre, and there on the table I saw my legs for the first time, the left one in a wire splint and bandaged up to the thigh, and the right just a heavily bandaged stump above the knee. They took the bandages off both legs at once, and I began to scream amidst the sympathetic cooing sounds of the German orderlies who were attending to me. When the dressings were off they began to shave the skin surrounding the wounds on both legs. This felt as if sharp icy weights were being pressed into my bones, and I screamed and cried while they tried to hold me still. Fortunately I had not much energy, so that a few moments of this treatment made me unconscious.

When I came to again I was lying in the shade of a large vehicle, and I must have been comfortably injected with morphia, as I was in no pain. Presently a group of Germans gathered round me, and one who spoke English began to speak to me for them all. They came from the part of the front I had tried to raid the previous day, and had all received minor wounds either then or in the evening, when they had been attacked by the Indians. Amongst them was the very man who had hit my tank, a big surly man with not very much hair and a deep voice. When he was introduced to me I looked at him for a long time, but he said nothing in particular, nor did he acknowledge our strange relationship in any way. We discussed the skirmish of the previous day, and when I said there must have been a gun behind the one I was trying to capture, he said, "No, there were two," and indi-

cated with his fingers the angles at which they were placed behind the first gun. From our particular little battle we went on to discuss the campaign in general, and I am afraid I told them that we were better fighters than they were, but that our generals were not so good as theirs. The only excuse I can find for that is that I was very weak, and the burning bitterness and disappointment I felt about the summer battle just ended came out with a rush. We then discussed the whole war, and I reproved them for being allies of the Japanese, saying, "Surely you don't like them, do you?"—to which the big surly man made the irrelevant reply, "Well, you don't like us."

There were audible protests from the Germans when they heard that I was going to be evacuated by plane, which I took to be objections to an Englishman being flown back before a German. The plane was a Fiesler Storch which had two stretchers fitted into the fuselage. When I looked at the markings, I was rather perturbed to see that the black cross was far more prominent than the red cross, and at once began calculating the angles from which a British plane might attack without even seeing the red one. There were windows in the sides of the plane through which I could see the ground we flew over on one side and the sea on the other, for the plane flew low along the coast. I wonder if anywhere else in the world there is such a vivid delineation of colour between land and margent seas as on the desert coasts of North Africa. Land, a shimmering yellowish amber, and though shimmering, yet thick and heavy; sea, a blue with so many reflected transparencies of other blues that the blue might be as deep as the centre of the earth. There lay Mersa Matruh, with the skirt of blue sea showing a gleaming white petticoat of sand, and to my disappointment we were circling to land. Once in the plane, I had hoped to get farther from the battlefield than Mersa Matruh.

A perfect silent landing, with a plume of thick dust coiling behind us on the aerodrome, and a dreaded Italian ambulance. Pain again as the ambulance rocked and jerked over the pitted and riven surfaces of the roads and tracks leading

to the Italian beach hospital. Here I heard, just before the doors of the ambulance opened, the first English voices since my capture, and to my great relief there was an English doctor, called Hannah, who came from Cheshire. Throughout my stay there he was very kind to me, but as he had to spend half the day at the docks, where prisoners were working for the Germans, and was also much in demand because he spoke German, I saw very little of him. I was there for nine days.

The "hospital" for prisoners was just a tent on the beach a few yards from the sea, and adjacent to the stone hospital buildings which the Italians used. The beds were two-storied iron frames with undulating sackcloth springs which were extremely uncomfortable to lie on. There was a more or less unlimited supply of British "biscuit" mattresses with which we tried to make a level bed, but unfortunately the "biscuit" is so strongly made that one cannot pommel it into a sympathetic shape. As I was too weak to move myself from the prone position, and the heat made me sweat, I soon developed a bedsore at the base of my spine, and a small chip in my back, probably part of my disintegrated tank, also gave me trouble until it was removed. The blankets felt rough and hard, but if I threw them off in the heat of the day a cloud of flies would settle on my dressings.

The first day or two my wounds looked clean and red as they had not begun to discharge, but when the left leg was put into plaster of Paris, the pus came through in a few hours, and the smell became frightful. However, after a chat with the Italian doctor, the only confident, efficient and pleasant one I ever met, Hannah decided to take off the top part, and dress the wounds ordinarily. The Italian did most of the work, and set my foot in a better position. He spoke French, and I remember having a conversation with him in which he marvelled at the efficiency of junior British medical officers compared with the senior ones. I gave him the explanation, namely that generally in peace-time only the doctors who could not get good civil positions joined the army, and when war came these men became senior to doctors who volunteered

for war service, and their army experience made them suitable for administrative positions in the Medical Corps. I said that few of them did any practical medical work in war-time.

The amputation had necessarily been a guillotine one, because the leg had been exposed to infection for a long time before treatment. Besides, there had been a tourniquet on it for over four hours without being eased, so that it would have been too risky to close the wound with stitches, with the result that I had a wound at the end of my stump as big as the thickness of my leg.

I remember the first two or three dressings vividly. For these ordeals I was taken underground into the Italian hospital past packed rows of whimpering and dirty Italian wounded, who seemed to like living in the stuffy and smelly half-light of their cellar. Once in the theatre the fun would begin. I was highly nervous and very weak, so that before long on each occasion I was screaming at the least touch and tears were streaming down my face. What worried me most was the great number of my wounds, for with two or more people bending over me I was unable to concentrate on what the terrible hands were doing to one wound for fear that another might be attacked without my knowledge. For example, one day the Italian's hands were just approaching the wound over the fracture on my left leg, when I jerked convulsively. He started back in surprise, saying, "*Mais je ne fais rien.*" He had rested his elbow for a moment on my knee, where a metal fragment was lodged against the knee-cap, but I was too exhausted and fed up to explain. Besides, I knew that my behaviour was weak and cowardly, and that to have a satisfactory excuse for just one of my outbursts would make no difference to the general opinion of me. It was on one of those rotten mornings after being dressed that Hannah gave me a shot of morphia, the first I had had since leaving my friends of the German 90th Light Division. I sank almost at once into a deep and restful sleep, in which I dreamt no actual dream, but was aware of a superb and beneficent peacefulness throughout, as reigning supreme in a calm world of sombre relaxed colours. I shall never forget that sleep. I

awoke refreshed and confident, and it set my prevailing mood for the whole time I was fighting my wounds.

It was here that I saw the only Englishmen I have ever met who were actually captured by Italians. They were a Bren-carrier crew under an N.C.O. who had sallied rather too close to a twenty-millimetre Breda, an excellent little gun, and had paid the penalty. There was also a large South African corporal who was intent on escaping to El Alamein. He was lucky enough to have his shaving kit still, and one day he gave me a very good and gentle shave with his last new blade. A sergeant who lay in the opposite corner from me gave me a tooth-brush and paste, one of the best presents I have ever received, for truly, of all uncomfortable feelings whether one is fit or ill or merely suffering from a hangover, a dirty mouth is the most persistent. It is even more omnipresent than a guilty conscience. Then there was the crew of a Beaufighter which had been forced down near Sollum. They had started walking back, but had been caught outside the eastern defences of Mersa Matruh. Their feet were in a horribly lacerated state, and I marvelled that they had had the spirit to keep going as long as they did.

We saw very little British activity in the nine days that I was there, but the little we did see was highly satisfactory. One day some bombers came over at so great a height that not a German gun fired before the bombs dropped, and to our great joy our docks' reconnaissance was able to report that two ships in Mersa Matruh harbour had been hit. Then one night hell was let loose. Some British destroyers sneaked up the coast under cover of darkness to shell the harbour, and caused one enormous explosion. Docks' reconnaissance was jubilant on the morrow, reporting that an ammunition ship had been blown up.

On the fourth day Hannah came to me and said, "You'll be pleased to hear you're off the 'Dangerously Ill' list." I laughed and replied that I didn't know I had been on it, whereupon he said that nine out of ten with my wounds would have died before being picked up, and that I was lucky to be alive.

Hannah had had some difficulty in persuading me to eat during the first few days, but had succeeded eventually, largely because of the titbits he was able to produce from his secret store of British rations, which was fast dwindling. Many a prisoner's mouth would have watered at the sight of a sergeant sitting beside his bed with a delicate slice of white bread thickly spread with marmalade, saying, "Come on now, just one more mouthful, please!"

On the eighth day there was a big combined operation centred on my bed, and after being held up in a lying position for a few minutes by six stalwart men, I triumphantly opened my bowels for the first time since being wounded. Hannah had tried on me every pill and dose he knew, and I gathered that it was some new and potent combination that did the trick. Afterwards he laughed like a child with a chemistry set who has got some strange liquids to react to each other after shaking them in a test tube.

There was an Italian orderly who came in from time to time. He had no work to do, and used to spend long periods squatting at my bedside, spitting all over the place and painting vivid pictures of the comfort and ease I was soon to get in Italy. Our medium of communication was mostly pantomime, with a word or two of Italian thrown in occasionally when the eyes became tired of rolling and the blowing of kisses became monotonous. First of all I would go on a "Nave ospedale," he said, and there followed a swaying of the body to convey the idea of the ship going over the waves. Of course I would have clean sheets (stroking the sackcloth bed and kissing his hands) and wonderful food (rubbing his stomach and rolling his eyes), kind and gentle doctors (putting out his half-closed hand in the Latin "just so" gesture and clicking his tongue) and beautiful nursing sisters (touching his heart, sighing, and then folding his hands as if for prayer). A few days of this sort of thing made me yearn to be sent back to Tobruk, where I was certain to be put on board the hospital ship which came from the new Elysium, and I kept asking Hannah when I was going. As fast as British wounded came in they were sent back, and there I still was, and I couldn't understand it at

all. They kept putting me off by saying that the others were strong enough to go by ordinary lorry, and I would have to wait until an ambulance convoy went. The fact was that I was too weak to be moved, and they would not tell me that, of course. Then one day the Italian came in beaming all over his face, with his little brown eyes shining, and said I was going to Tobruk the next day. I was overjoyed. Later, in Italy, I heard from one of the sergeants who was at Matruh with me what led up to this move of mine. The Italian received orders to clear the beach hospital of wounded prisoners. Hannah told him that if I were moved that distance, I would die, but the Italian said he could not help that, and so I was moved.

IV

TO TOBRUK

I WAS lifted into the ambulance, and just before the doors closed I had a last glimpse of the shining brown eyes of the little man who had been so kind to me and was now expecting me to be dead within twenty-four hours. It was a large ambulance, boasting four rickety stretchers, seats for about twelve more men, and squatting space for three or four less fortunate ones. There were about ten of these ambulances lined up on the dusty track that led down to the sea, all ticking over in the maddening spasmodic way that Diesel engines have, and as we were stationary the fumes became pretty powerful during the hour or so we waited there. We spent the time getting acquainted, the Italians and I. They seized my *Cartella Clinica*, a huge medical record sheet which has a space for every minute particular of the patient's life history, from the place he was wounded to his mother's maiden name and the number of children he has. After registering surprise and awe at the elevation of my rank and at my youth, they fastened on my second Christian name, Ernest, and began questioning me about my capture, and the night life of Alexandria, in which they hoped soon to participate. I unravelled for them the most mystical city of romance possible with the limited means at my disposal, having great confidence as I did in the ability of the British army to defend it, and hoping by my glowing description to magnify their sense of frustration and loss in not being there. Shortly before we left the doors were thrown open, and huge pieces of bread and jam were passed round. "Airrnest?" queried a big bald man with enormous eyebrows and a bandage round his temples. "Grazie," I replied, and attacked the bread with relish. It was very good.

The journey was hell. We travelled very slowly and there were long inexplicable halts, while we frequently had to get off the road and bump along in the ruts when convoys going

up the line had to pass. The heat was intense. So was the smell of the Italians, to which I never quite became accustomed. But they were kind to me, these Italians, especially the huge bald man, who kept offering me water from his equally huge water-bottle, and was indefatigable in finding out for me the time and our distance from the different places along the coast. Dusk came, and we were still jerking along the ruined, half-asphalted road between Buq-Buq and Sollum. When night fell we were collected under the stars in the yard of the battered hospital at the top of Halfaya Pass, and ten hours of suffering were over. I was carried into a cold stone corridor without lights, and lay exhausted in the vault of sound created by the wailing and crying of the Italian wounded and the raucous insistent shouts of their panting and seemingly bewildered stretcher-bearers. After a time I was put into a bed with real, if abbreviated, white sheets, and the morphia I urgently demanded having been given me, I went to sleep until about two a.m., when I awoke for the interminable and painful wait for the light which seems to be the lot of all sick people.

In the morning I was given a bowl of black acorn coffee which had such a strong taste that I raised my head and began to take notice. In the bed opposite was an Italian with both legs off, and only about three inches of stump on each side. Both were quite healed, and I wondered why he was still in Africa if he had been wounded so long ago.

My stump felt as if it needed a new dressing. It seemed as if there was something sticking out of the end which was catching in the gauze and giving me a violent twinge if I moved even an inch or two. However, after I had had a bed-pan with the aid of three Italian orderlies, I lay back in such pain and exhaustion that I was no longer interested in dressings, and ceased agitating for them. All these early days my broken leg with its three large wounds and numberless smaller ones gave me no pain or trouble except when it was being dressed, a merciful factor in my getting better, for I think that if both legs had given me the pain at the same time that they gave me in turn, I should not have survived.

We resumed our journey after a twelve o'clock lunch of a bowl of tinned milk and a piece of bread and jam, and I was rather disappointed not to see my huge bald Bersaglieri soldier in the ambulance. I had asked for a bottle of Recoaro water to help me pass the journey, and an English-speaking Italian padre gave it me just before we left, so that I was independent of Italian water-bottles, which seemed to me to have mouths of an unprecedented variety and dirtiness constantly drawing at their necks. Ugh!

It was as hot as the day before, and a high wind kept a thin veil of sand particles filtering up and down through the rank air inside the ambulance. As on the day before, I spent the entire journey moaning and cursing at the bumps and asking the time and what distance we were from Tobruk. Every time we hit a bump unnecessarily we set up a plaintive chorus of "Adagio!" but it had little effect. The mitigating element in the journey for me was my large bottle of fizzy water, which I joyously applied to my mouth whenever my morale sank, and it was not surprising that when we halted for a while I asked them to find some receptacle which I could use as a bottle. They picked up a rusty British fruit tin in the ditch and were loud in their praises when I filled it twice.

Towards the end of the day my courage and powers of resistance ebbed considerably, and it was an exhausted and whimpering prisoner whom the ambulance jolted across the desert after it had disgorged the Italians at the underground hospital where the road turns south to El Adem. The pain was all-pervading now, and seemed to be flaunting its mastery over me by giving sharp jabs at the crescendo of each wave. At last we stopped, the doors were flung open, the cool starlit air came pausingly into my narrow and dusty purgatory, and on the air came a grumbling voice: "You'd think the bloody world had come to an end just because an officer prisoner arrives in the middle of the night. F——ing wops!" "Thank Christ for an English voice!" I muttered, as two huge hairy nakednesses took me into their arms. "Yes, chum, you're all right now."

They were two South African Medical Corps corporals,

Swann and Croxon, whom I shall always remember for their superb nursing ability and steadfast kindness. Swann was the more large-hearted of the two, but Croxon was always stimulated by his example, and the result was that there was little to choose between them. They were both over six feet three inches tall, and as they had been pulled out of bed to deal with me and had on only their shorts, they gave me the impression of being hairy giants.

I was put into a real bed this time, on a straw mattress and between two clean white sheets. I clamoured for a dressing on my stump, but their reply was to give me a sleeping draught which gradually overwhelmed the pain. I awoke very soon after to the sound of bombs and anti-aircraft fire, which did not seem to worry me in the least, partly because of the sleeping draught, I suppose, and partly because of the continuation of that glorious feeling of personal supremacy over the world which I had first felt when lying beside the German anti-tank gun. During the fourteen days I was in the Italian hospital the R.A.F. came over every single night and never stayed for less than two hours. Often it was four. We were between the two main targets, the aerodrome and the harbour, and only once while I was there did bombs drop close to us. I used to lie there in a pleasant half-doze watching the reactions of Gunn, the British M.O., to the whistling of the bombs, and laughing to myself in a nasty superior sort of way as his bed shook when he started. When the bombs dropped within two hundred yards one night he was almost under the bed, but as they dropped just before he got there he evidently thought no purpose would be served by ducking, and climbed into bed again as nonchalantly as possible, while I shook with inward laughter. None of us wounded seemed to care a hoot for the bombing and shell fragments, nor did Swann and Croxon give any sign that they cared, but all the Italians, even our guards, rushed off to their underground shelters as fast as their legs would carry them the moment the siren went. In the mornings they appeared a trifle pale, and only talked about it when a British plane was supposed to have been shot down.

The prisoners' annexe of the Italian hospital at Tobruk was organized rather to our liking. In the first place we had our own doctor, a man six feet four inches tall, with bushy black eyebrows which met over a prominent nose, a moustache on a short upper lip which inclined upwards from the corners of his perpetually opened mouth, and lanky limbs flung out from a body based on feet of an enormous length. He was a kind-hearted man with a sense of humour. Swann and Croxon, whom I have already mentioned, made Gunn's work very much easier for him, and also looked after some South African negro medical orderlies who did the medical and domestic chores of the place. Unfortunately, a day or two after my arrival, one of the darkies got drunk, with the result that none of them was allowed to work for us any more. The Italians pinched the two best ones to do their own dirty work, and sent the rest off to the prison camp, so that Swann and Croxon had to carry stretchers and empty bedpans in between the thirty or so daily dressings of wounds they did. Then there was an Italian nursing sister from Milan, a tall and capable woman of about thirty-five, who was very kind to us, occasionally getting us tea and sugar, of which there was no ration, and taking our part when we clamoured for more food. I think she did us all those good turns mostly for love of Swann. They used to stand at the entrance to the tent conversing with the maximum of pantomime and the minimum of broken English and Italian, laughing together at the stupidest things, he radiating smiles and good-humour from his kind face, and she changing from one foot to the other and looking up at him with the idiotic expression of unconscious fascination. From the moment she came into the tent with the obvious notion of talking to Swann, she would protest that she would have to go in a moment for something or other, and finally, after many peerings outside the tent and many enumerations of all she had to do, she would tear herself away.

She worked under a small, smelly, inefficient and entirely dull Italian doctor, who would not have been admitted to a British hospital even as a student, even if he had undergone the bath, shave and facial remodelling which would have been

highly necessary if he had wished not to be repulsive to his fellow creatures. He had used to smell worse, Gunn told me, but he had improved suddenly, and our reconstruction of events leading up to this improvement was that the dear sister, unable to walk behind this mobile refuse heap any longer, had complained to the colonel of the hospital.

Apart from the sister and the doctor, who sometimes did dressings in conjunction with Gunn and sometimes left him to do all the work, we saw very little of the Italian doctors, although if there was an operation to be done the patient would be carried down to the Italian hospital, to return later cursing the Italians for a callous, inhuman and ignorant race. It seems that the Italian method of getting to the root of the trouble in a wound was to find the spot which hurt most and then go on prodding or manipulating to convince themselves that they had found it.

The food ration was quite inadequate for active men in good health, for even while I was there, Swann and Croxon became noticeably thinner and had increased trouble with their digestions, but for sick people in bed it must have been sufficient, because on it I grew daily stronger, so that the day before I left, twenty-two days after being wounded, I was able to get on to a stretcher by myself. The daily diet consisted of black ersatz coffee at 7.30 a.m., a bowl of rice or macaroni soup with a stringy piece of strange meat in it, a small loaf of bread and four sweets wrapped in paper at midday, and a bowl of tinned milk in the evening. Men who were on their feet were given soup again instead of milk at night. Occasionally a tin of Italian salted meat, half the size of English bully-beef, appeared to be shared between two or three, and after a prolonged duel with the Italian authorities, in which the sister was our staunchest protagonist, we were granted the luxury of an occasional jam issue. This latter was most necessary, because without it we could hardly eat our bread, the ration of which was quite good. Swann and Croxon had a steadily diminishing store of British food, which they eked out very carefully at the rate of about one tin every three days, and they cooked it themselves on these gala days, using a stove

they had carefully concealed from our acquisitive hosts. The paraffin for it was brought by a kindly disposed Italian soldier in conditions of great secrecy. Swann and Croxon's food had been left with them by the Germans, who had taken all they wanted from the Field Ambulance on their entry into Tobruk, and had departed saying, "We'll leave the rest with you. But for God's sake don't let the Italians lay their hands on any of it!" Those evenings when Swann used to go to the private food store, saying, "M. and V. to-night, boys!" were a great boon to us. There was always a great comedy played while the wonderful stuff was cooking and permeating the whole tent with its comforting smell, in which Swann would pretend first that Gunn was going to be left out of the feast, then that in any case I was too weak to eat meat, and finally that there was only enough for himself and Croxon, and anyway what the hell were we two officers doing trying to insinuate ourselves into the beanos of two poor corporals? What fun it was lying there, watering at the mouth with sheer anticipation, watching the erratic paraffin flames lick round the saucepan and illuminate Swann's stubbly chin, hairy chest and encircling arms as he held the pan with one hand and stirred with the other, while the tent bulged and flapped in the evening wind, and the broad and burning sun shot level streams of dusty light through the writhing canvas window in the western side of the tent! And the first cup of tea we had, made possible by our angel! Having no kettle and no lid for the saucepan, and using a rather derelict stove whose reaction to a gusty wind was the same as that of a self-conscious girl with light skirts, i.e. complete "flap", it was not surprising that we could not make the water boil. It was too dark to see if it was boiling, as we were allowed no lights at all after sundown, and the wind was making too much noise for us to hear if it was boiling, so finally, just when the paraffin was giving out its last transfigurations into flame, Swann flung in the tea-leaves. The drink was not bad, but surely, if there is any power in united wills, if there is any force in common prayer, or if the concentrated desires of a few men have any influence on chemical reactions, that water would have boiled?

Swann and Croxon were the only prisoners there who possessed washing kit, as they were captured complete, so there was only one way the rest of us could wash, that is to say by wetting ourselves and letting it dry, if we could get the water. We were allowed about a cupful a day for washing, and this I used to get the sand out of my eyes and ears. When I had done this I cleaned my teeth in it, for I had clung to the toothpaste and brush given me at Mersa Matruh. My hair was very long, and so matted with sand that when I pushed it back it stayed back. One day I was shown a mirror, and was moved enough by the shock-headed spectacle it contained to state that I didn't normally brush my hair straight back, whereupon Gunn remarked that he did think I looked rather a randy sod at present. As for my body, it had never been washed at Mersa Matruh because of the impossibility of moving me, and now with the daily sweating and use of bedpans, I was quite repulsive to myself. There was no paper, of course, and Swann and Croxon were extremely efficient at stealing cotton-wool for toilet purposes, besides doing the job properly, a quality found only in the best medical orderlies. All the time I was there I had to have two men to help me over the bedpan operation and a rolled-up mattress at my back to support me. I was always very careful not to strain, because tales had come to my ears of amputation cases bursting the tied-up ends of arteries, and one doctor said to me, "If an amputation case in the early stages asks for a bedpan in a hurry, I always tell my orderlies to take along a tourniquet." I kept clamouring to be washed properly, so that at last Swann took pity on me, collected a basin of water and stole a good wad of cotton-wool from the surgery tent, but at the last moment he was unable to get the soap the Italians had promised him, and the rite was performed with cold water, cotton-wool and loving care alone. Alas! Only the top crust of the filth which encumbered my lower parts was persuaded to leave me, and though I smelled a little fresher for a few hours afterwards, the combined action of sweat and sand soon replaced the layers of muck that had been removed. The rest of my body was covered with a layer of

fine ruddy brown dust except on the sweating surfaces, where I had grey and grimy layers of sticky dirt. The dry parts where there was hair itched, including my head, and the wet parts just stuck and stank. I did not worry about my hands, because if I felt at meal-times that they were really too foul to handle my food, I picked up a handful of dust from the ground beside my bed and rubbed it between my hands and fingers till all the surfaces were smooth and dry. It sounds uncivilized, but actually it was sensible and hygienic.

We had four books, two of which were violently anti-Nazi novels by prominent Jewish writers, and these I soon read in spite of the fact that I could only sit up supported by a rolled-up mattress for about half an hour at a time. When they were finished there was nothing for me to do except lie and watch the entrance to the tent to see what happened beyond, and more particularly, strain forward with the whole of my being to hear the friendly returning footstep of Swann or Croxon or Gunn, who were out most of the day working with the wounded other ranks. There was usually a morning visit from the Italian doctor, preceded by a short and commonplace, yet utterly delightful, conversation in French with the sister, but apart from that the only events of the day were the two meals. I lay there all day under my sheet, a slave to the shooting pains in my stump, moaning most of the time, especially when dozing or half asleep. My lost foot came to life, jarring and jumping unexpectedly on the blank sheet beyond the bandages so that I came to anticipate the jerks of pain and tried to move to frustrate them. It was a great relief when there was someone there, whether he was talking to me or not, because I could get out of my pain-conscious self and become intent on his every movement, except when the spasms of pain shocked me back to self-consciousness every two minutes or so.

The uninteresting things I got people to talk about! Gunn about his fishing, a sport the contemplation of which horrified me with its suggestion of long wet days spent meditating on fishy slimy fish which won't bite; Swann about the fall of Tobruk, which hurt and bewildered me still, and his wife and

children, which immersed me in the futility of war; and the bringer of paraffin about the glory of Italian arms and the imminent fall of Alexandria, which made me laugh patronizingly. I was in such a position that he could afford to laugh patronizingly at me for laughing patronizingly at him, so we never became angry with each other, although a little mild heat crept into the atmosphere when he suggested that Malta was almost "kaput". He told me that I must watch out for the 7th September, because then would begin the drive that would end in a few days with a British evacuation of Egypt.

Flies! The first flies woke us up. Before the tent was opened in the morning they would be there in the half-light, circling drowsily over our heads and crawling stickily on our faces, so that we stirred, and swore, and covered our heads with the sheets; but that made us breathe hot air and nearly stifled us, so we had to put out our noses. The bell would ring, the tent flap be opened, the lukewarm coffee doled out with a lot of clattering by a cursing Italian with a perpetual cough, and a few minutes later Gunn, Swann and Croxon would stumble out into the fresh yellow sunlight, leaving the flies to concentrate on the bed-patients. I used to expose my left leg as far as the large patch of pus on the bandages over my shin in an attempt to provide a greater attraction for them than my face, but usually some of them would find additional diversion exploring between my toes which protruded from the plaster, and I didn't like that, so I had to lean forward and drape the end of the sheet over my toes, and still leave the patch of pus exposed. This was no easy matter, because apart from the exhaustion of clawing myself to a sitting position, I had a lot of pain in my stump when I did any sort of moving about. It was not only exhausting trying to sit up; it was exhausting, and needed thoughtful preparation, to let myself down again into a lying position without dropping my shoulders the last few inches and so jerking my wounds into agonizing activity. Then in the heat of the day, when I would have given anything to leave my body open to any chance wandering currents of air, I had to lie under the sheet to escape the flies, sweating from every pore in my body and

lying on a steadily dampening sheet which aggravated my bedsore more and more. After lunch, if I wished to sleep, I had to put my head under the sheet and contrive a cunning and tortuous aperture through which my nose could take in air, and even there the dronings and interrupted buzzings of the little fiends filled my drowsing mind with a feverish and miasmal activity. Under the sheet my arms sweated, and my head also sweated, sending trickles of salt in sensitively-felt channels down my sandy scalp, so that I itched and stirred and began to scratch. If I did get to sleep with my head under the sheet I awoke feeling blotched and blurred, panting for a draught of fresh air which never came. Usually in the afternoon the wind was a little stronger than in the morning or evening, and this drove the healthy flies who liked buzzing about in the sunlight over refuse heaps (the Italians had no refuse pits) and lavatories into the moderately still airs inside the tents, so that on these windy afternoons we not only had to contend with the sullen clouds of sand blanketed up by the threshing sides of the loosely flapping tent, but a fresh influx of vigorous flies. The locker at my bedside, from which I ate my food, although it was cleaned every day by Swann or Croxon, attracted them more than anything, and I used to lie and watch them piling on top of each other in stickily foul and attractive places, chary of moving lest they should take fright, rise up in a cloud and settle on me instead. They used to clamber all over young rocks of abandoned breadcrumbs, and loved the actual place on the rim of my tin bowl from which I had drunk soup or coffee earlier in the day so much that I marked the spot mentally and avoided it at the next meal. I was able to frustrate them to a certain extent by inverting the bowl over my remaining bread on the plate, but even then they insinuated their loathsome flat heads into the curving crevice at the meeting-place of rim and plate. At meal-times I had to be propped up with my spare mattress, and as I could not eat from my locker because of the twisting of my trunk and resultant moving of and pain in my legs, I had to use both hands for feeding myself, one to hold the bowl and the other to wield the spoon. This meant that I had

no hand free to deal with marauding flies, which took advantage of the fact of my impotence to deal with them and settled on the rim of the bowl or even on my lips. Well, I could not hit them with the spoon for fear of crushing them and fouling my spoon, so I could either wave my spoon near them in the hope of bluffing them into flying away, in which case they turned their horrid little heads warily towards the threatened quarter and stayed where they were, or I could blow them away by plain violence, which soon made me so dizzy and exhausted that I could not enjoy my food.

One of their organized resting places was the lavatory. I never saw it, but Swann told me that when he went there to empty a bedpan he was attacked by such a cloud of them that he literally could not see the blue sky beyond and he was frightened that they would be crushed between his eyes and eyelids, the press was so thick. I was thankful that my wounds were far enough from my hands and face for their nimbus of flies not to worry me, because the fellows with head and body wounds had these crawling mounds of relentless insects right beside the seats of their too vivid and overstrained senses.

My wounds were dressed the first two days I was in Tobruk, and thereafter every other day, except when there was a sand-storm blowing, and then, although Gunn said it would be quite all right, I preferred to lie stinking for a further twenty-four hours rather than expose my wounds to the sifting dust in the air in the surgery tent. I used to look forward to being dressed, for it meant that I was carried out of the gloomy tent, and passed across about twenty yards of bright and beneficent sunlight which warmed the light wind that settled on and revived my weak body. In the few seconds spent in crossing those twenty yards I could take in more of the surrounding desert with its atmosphere than ever filtered into the consciousness of those who stumbled about the place all day with their heads down, selecting the next stone they would kick with their iron-tipped boots. Then there was all the fun of getting from my bed on to the stretcher and from the stretcher to the table.

Dressings at Tobruk were never painful as at Matruh, and

Gunn only once complained that I would not keep still when he was digging for metal. On that occasion I did eventually lie still, and he was able to pull out the little bit of my tank which was resting against my knee-cap. Swann always used to say how healthy my wounds looked, and was lost in admiration of my stump, although he could not quite get used to the particular type of amputation. I was very curious about my stump, but I was unable to see the wound without a mirror, and as no mirror was forthcoming I had to guess what it looked like from the answers to the many questions I put to Swann. When I asked him how big was the area of the wound, he said that it covered seven or eight square inches, and I calculated from this that it had begun to draw together already. Apparently the bone was still exposed, but they seemed to think it did not matter, and soon flattered me into such a state that I used to brag about possessing the best and healthiest stump in the Western Desert.

The hours of darkness were the worst. In the evening the pain in my stump increased as I became more and more tired, and the depressing dusk which slowly swamped my cosmos of tent seemed to thicken the twinges into substantial missiles, battering my sharpened senses. Every night, usually after a short skirmish, I was given a sleeping tablet or two, of which Gunn had a small English supply left, and after I had taken it I lay there waiting for the desultory conversation to splutter out and the drug to have its effect. I usually slept until the beginning of the air raid, that is to say three or four hours during which, I was told, I moaned continuously. Then the first bangs padded softly into my drugged spirit, and things slowly began to take shape. The bangs were nearly always remote from me, and I gave less thought to them than to the uncertain throbbing of the bombers' engines which came to us in gaps between the crescendoes of anti-aircraft fire. I remember pitying the British bomber crews, picturing them as young fellows with all their senses on edge, straining to pick out their targets and avoid the shells and searchlights, and going on raid after raid until a mathematically certain doom overtook them. I thought, too, of the hard unyielding rock of

Tobruk, which showed scarcely any sign of its two years of constant bombing, and wondered forlornly if it would soften under British bombs. At least work in the harbour could not go on while British bombers were overhead, which was the one certain advantage of visiting the place nightly, but for British bombs I wanted falling masonry, blazing dumps and gaping shelters.

By the time the raid was over I was fully awake, and faced with four smooth suffering hours until the tent flap was opened. My lost leg began to insist on its presence, jerking into my senses every minute or two like a flickering electric sign. Sometimes the toes would feel as if they were doubled up, or the sole of my foot would itch, or the skin would be tightened all over the foot. These sensations were interesting and amusing by day, as the pain was no worse than rather vigorous pins and needles, and I could discuss them and give a running commentary on them, but at night they were a wearying and tedious barrier between me and sleep. Through their tiresome evolutions I waited in fear and apprehension for the periodic shock of the atrophying but still very spry nerves. The coming of the imperceptibly lightening dawn on the bare desert outside filled me with a great desire for the activities of the day, and the scraping of boots, coughing and sound of guy-ropes rubbing on canvas that heralded the morning coffee and beginning of the day relieved me utterly. After an hour of daylight activities I was usually able to doze off for about an hour, after providing carefully against the flies.

V

*"Enter, solemnly tripping one after another, six
Personages."*

THE man I chiefly remember at Tobruk was an Australian sergeant pilot whose name I have forgotten, but whose suffering will always stay in my memory as a horrifying and unnecessary experience. He was the pilot of a fighter which was shot down just off the Libyan coast between Tobruk and Bardia. In the water he became entangled in his parachute, and after a blind and panic-stricken fight of self-preservation he managed to get ashore, wearing only shorts and with his system full of salt water. He must have lain on the beach exhausted, exposed to the pouring heat of the African sun, and then tried to walk somewhere, because he was found by some Italians in a practically senseless state, and brought into the hospital. He staggered in, his slim body and childish inanimate face beneath a ridiculous Italian sun-helmet making him an infinitely pathetic figure. I do not remember what the Italian medical opinion of him was, nor what sort of treatment they intended to give him, but I have a very clear memory of Gunn explaining in his laborious French to the nodding and uncomprehending Italian, and saying when the Italian had gone, "It's no use. They don't understand. They won't do anything." Everything the poor boy ate immediately poured out of his mouth again. He regained his senses, and once or twice stood up swaying, even walking outside the tent. Everywhere he went and in everything he did he had the compassionate eyes of the British medical staff on him, but they could do nothing without the equipment the Italians either did not possess or would not use. "If that boy dies," Swann said to me, "it'll be murder just as surely as if the Italian doctor comes in and shoots him with a pistol." When the Italians found that he was not able to keep down his food, they fed him by injections in his thigh, thus adding an acute local pain to his general suffering, and incidentally doing

no good. After every bout of food he was quite prostrate with pain. One morning he seemed a little better to my ignorant eyes. He talked a little in the strained fashion of a man fighting for air, and lay back afterwards on his pillow. A few breaths, a cough and a splutter, and he was dead. As Swann and Croxon covered him with a sheet, the sister said, "If we could have saved his life, we would have done so, but there was nothing we could do"—while Gunn and Swann were muttering that it was murder, and that he had died simply from lack of oxygen.

We had a pet, a small mongrel bitch of the darling type found in many a British regiment in the Middle East, loving, lovable and panting for love. She could not understand the Italians, who generally have little love for animals and treat them with a callousness which shows what an unimaginative race they are, and was pathetically grateful to share the destitution and community spirit of the prisoners. She was badly out of condition, had fleas and was expecting a family, although how she scraped enough food from the refuse heaps to sustain the life within her was a mystery to all of us. She walked about looking a little lost, suffering, we thought, either from acute homesickness or mild bomb-happiness, an austere and ruffled little figure of black and white which never barked. She used to come into our tent to rub her back on the underside of the beds, whining and yawning as she did so, with her dry sand-caked nose twitching, and I am afraid I was so frightened of catching her fleas in my immobile state that I would not let her rub against my bed.

We had a varying quantity of water in the tent for the use of orderlies and patients, so that Swann and Croxon never grudged her a drink, but one day when water was short she had a long drink from a basin which contained water and some stuff for killing flies. When she had finished she coughed a little, wagged her tail feebly, and pattered out slowly and deliberately, but she did not give any visible signs of having suffered because of her strange drink.

Her time approached, and we were all quite certain she would produce her litter in our tent, as we were her only

friends. However, the Italians always made sure that she was not in the tent when it was closed up for the night, so we thought we would be able to have some influence in choosing the spot for her nest. One morning we awoke to a plaintive chorus of tiny squeals which came from between the outer and inner walls of the tent, where Swann and Croxon kept their kit, and we knew that a few more wretched little lives had come to be lived in the familiar desolation of Tobruk. "What's the betting the little bitch hasn't chosen my greatcoat to throw her pups on?" cried Swann, leaping out of bed. It was true. She had chosen Swann's greatcoat, and lay there looking up at him, helplessly beseeching his approval with every move of her head and body, while her family burrowed and squealed among themselves within the warm protecting curve she made for them. Swann stood there cursing, Croxon laughing, and Gunn and I lay on the other side of the tent thoroughly enjoying the entertainment, but we all knew that something had to be done at once because of Swann's greatcoat, and that something permanent had to be arranged about feeding the family.

The Italians decided for us. The prisoners could not have the animals. They would have to be moved right away from the patients. We communicated this order to the Italian who brought us paraffin for the stove, and he kindly undertook to set up the family in a new home, a wooden box beside the refuse heap. Her new home could be seen from my bed through the tent flap, and I used to watch her walking about in search of food and carefully keeping out of the way of the Italian soldiers who passed by the refuse heap to go to and from the cookhouse. She used to visit us after that, running the gauntlet of authority to a certain extent on her way across, but what became of her I do not know. My last memory of her is on one of the days of sandstorm, when I saw her walking slowly across the line of the blast with her little head averted to the leeward side and her coat all ruffled and dishevelled by the tearing gale, while she seemed to have some difficulty in keeping her balance.

* Then there was an Italian whose chief duty seemed to be

doling out sweets at lunch-time. He was a cross between a comedy Caruso and the Italian conception of what Casanova should have been. Pretty, with red lips and brown eyes, he sauntered round the camp with his cap fixed carefully to look jaunty on his brown curls, and his belt drawn tight at the waist to make his chest and shoulders look tremendous and soul-stirring. His talk was all about signorinas and his heart's reaction to them, and as he talked about his amorous exploits he would treat his listener to the lazily charming yet glistening smile for which half the girls in Italy had fallen. He was a joke even to his own countrymen, but was popular as the special type who represented the illusion of singing care-free Italy. His tenor voice was typically Italian, always in tune, rich in timbre and volume, full of yearning, but not subtle in expression. His voice about the camp, usually at dawn and dusk, the quiet times when the dayspring persuades men to lull their feverish activities, was a boon to me, for in it I caught the musical language of my former existence, and savoured the satisfaction of the approaches to the only paradise I know.

There was a notable Englishman who came in bloodstained and filthy with his head in a capeline bandage late in July. After dumping his kit on his bed he took out his empty pipe, and pretending that it had a good fill of his favourite tobacco, he sat down and smoked himself into a state of enviable composure. He was a schoolmaster at a college in India and had joined the Indian army, ending up with one of the brigades that were sitting placidly in Iraq and were suddenly moved to the Western Desert to deal with the German threat to Alexandria. He was captured in a disastrous night attack on the 21st or 22nd July, the first time he had been in action, I think.

He was quite unmoved by the vicissitudes which had brought him to this dirty and badly equipped enemy hospital in the desert, giving the impression of having realized before joining up the sort of things he would have to face, and putting up with the unpleasant things now they had come without the least suggestion of personal regret. He made a few*

heartfelt and sad remarks about the particular attack in which he was caught, but I felt that the words came from an observer, not a participant. It was as if he were outside his body, and merely a spectator of the events in which he staked his corporeal frame for the sake of his opinions. How much stronger than and different from all other fighting men's spirits is the spirit of a man of intellect who goes to war with his mind decided! For the callow youth who rushes out dazzled by the first fanfare and squeals when faced with the reality of war there is derision and the hope that he will learn to do better, for the strong and brave man who fights and after his personal disaster still fights with his weapons of courage and unselfishness there is admiration and compassion, but for the man who knows everything beforehand and faces it as a matter of course there is only wonder and awe, for in him humanity has transcended itself.

In spite of his superb indifference and excellent morale in daytime, this schoolmaster was one of those who, tortured in their sleep with the throes of battle, used to get out of bed and stumble towards their nightmare objectives, crying, "On! On! On!" until they awoke cursing and had to be guided back to their beds sobbing and broken.

He used to sit by my bed and talk amusingly of his experiences with students in India, of riots, of passive resistance and how he turned the weapons of its advocates against themselves, and of the conflicting mentalities of his pupils and the difficulty of dealing with the different classes. We tried to improvise a chess-board by marking squares with a pencil on the top of the locker beside my bed, and wrote the names of the pieces on tiny scraps of paper, knowing well that we would have to memorize the positions on the board against the times when gusts of wind would unsettle everything. We had each made a few moves in the first game in between the long periods spent in putting the wind-scattered pieces in their proper places, when one of us lost a bishop because the diagonals were not straight. Then, looking hopelessly at the faint demarcation lines of the squares, I saw that the board was nine squares long on one side, so chess was off the pro-

gramme, although he did ask me if I could play without a board, just stating the moves by reference and memorizing them. I could not. It was a good thing, I think, that we never finished the first game, because I certainly should have suffered a heavy defeat, and as it was we remained bound by all the glorious games of chess unplayed between us.

Together with other slightly wounded men, a day or two after his arrival he was moved off to Derna, where I gather the flies and food were even worse, there was no British doctor, and the Italians were rather barbaric in their treatment of wounded prisoners. Lucky the people in camp with him in Italy!

There was a swarm of JU52s which disturbed our peace of mind by their noise, regularity of appearance and ceaseless activity. There were about forty of them, and they arrived at nine and four o'clock every day, staying only long enough to unload their cargoes before flying back to Europe. At their prescribed hours they began to arrive, and seemed to circle our tent with the deliberate intention of undermining our morale, circling slowly with their wheels down under their great heavy bodies, and each as it crossed the patch of blue sky revealed by my canvas window seemed to say, like some new allegorical horror from the *Insect Play*, "Little prisoner, look what *I've* got! Twenty big new Germans to fight your tired Englishmen. It won't half be a lark when we get to Alexandria." Round and round they went, and we waited and waited in vain for a questing Beaufighter to appear scattering and destroying them, for they were always unescorted. Only once was there any British activity over the aerodrome when they were landing, and that was when a few planes, flying so high that not an anti-aircraft gun fired until after the attack was over, dropped some bombs. We had no outside intelligence service at Tobruk, and as the Italians said nothing about it, we never heard the results of the raid.

Another Italian who occupied a lot of my attention and incidentally helped to bolster up my self-respect was the barber, who used to keep the hair on our faces a reasonable

length, though never according us the desirable honour of a regular shave. His hair was short and fuzzy, his eyes were perpetually screwed up by the glare, his prominent chin ended in an absurd outcrop of hair which emphasized the scragginess of his neck, his naked shoulders and chest were bent so far forward that the crucifix suspended from his neck by a dirty piece of cord dangled inches in front of his stomach, he wore shabby khaki shorts whose waist-line was below the navel, and he propelled himself about the camp very rapidly by a combined motion of bent knees and splayed-out feet. He was an artist at his job, giving with his much-used razor and loathsome Italian shaving soap a better shave than many an English barber in a saloon with chromium-plated fittings, but I think he was not used to shaving Englishmen, because his hands had a distinctly nether-worldly smell. One day, after we had had to put up with two or three days of his temperamental absence from his art, the Italian doctor agreed to plead personally for another shaving performance, but although the doctor fixed a time for him to visit us the next day, his languor prevailed, and he spent the time skulking in sensitive reticence in some out-of-the-way spot. Retribution was swift. We heard that he was to be punished for not shaving the prisoners.

There was a pole sticking up from the rocky ground near the cook-house, and I had often wondered what was its purpose. We discovered the day after the barber had fallen from grace. He was tied to it with a length of rope which left him free to move two or three yards in any direction. He was dressed as usual, that is to say in sandals, shorts and crucifix, but in addition he was surmounted, and almost extinguished, by an enormous sun-helmet; and there he stood for some hours, a pathetic stooping figure, looking for minutes on end in one direction, then slowly turning round to survey another patch of desert. He was apparently in Coventry, too, for I saw no one come and speak to him the whole time he was there. When he came to shave us the next day I almost blushed, because I had been foremost in clamouring for a shave. However, he bore his humiliation like a martyr of

a great cause, shaving us no better and no worse than before, and we played our part by not referring to the undignified restraint which had been forced on so great an artist.

"And so in their dancing they vanish, carrying the garland with them."

VI

IN TOBRUK HARBOUR

I WAS lying by the quay at Tobruk on a lighter, amongst a babble of Italian, German, English, French and Indian voices whose wounded owners were all waiting for the lighter to move off to the white hospital ship just outside the boom. I had left the Italian hospital at Tobruk in a state of great excitement after envious farewells from Gunn, Swann and Croxon. I heard later that the two corporals were moved to Benghazi after a few weeks, but whether they eventually came to Italy or were overtaken by the British advance from El Alamein I do not know.

At both ends of the lighter the stretcher cases were laid close to each other in rows. I was at the end of a row, and had next to me a pathetic Englishman who was too weak to move except for his hands and only just strong enough to mutter a word or two occasionally. I do not know what was wrong with him, but whatever it was made me thank heaven I had good clean straightforward wounds, for his skin was covered with light yellow flakes which had water underneath, and I have never seen anyone so thin and yet remain alive. He trembled a little from time to time, and smelled horribly. The flies were crawling in slowly spreading surges over him, congregating with busy heads at work on the many damp patches of the threadbare blanket which covered him. These and the sun worried him, so that from time to time he moved his hand under the blanket to shake them off or screen his eyes. The man on his other side and I took turns in keeping the flies away from his hollow eyes and rotting gums. The sun, against which we had no protection for the hour and a half we were there, was so strong that my top skin was still peeling a fortnight later, and I borrowed from another tank officer a brown silk scarf, which I tied over my head gipsy-fashion.

No one knew when we were supposed to be moving off to

the hospital ship, and as there were no signs of preparations being made, I fell to musing, wondering what would be the aftermaths of my long desert adventure. First of all there was the hospital ship, shimmering whitely in the blue sea of the brown-armed bay, ready to take me to Italy. Symbol of luxury, successful convalescence and peace, I longed for its circumambient coolness and cleanliness to blot out my African life. In my heart I was saying good-bye to the desert, good-bye to its exacting exhilarations in which I was no longer fit to participate, good-bye, above all, to that disastrous desert summer which I was now leaving to grind out its last few scorching weeks.

VII

RETROSPECT

"There is no greater sadness than to remember a happy time when one is unhappy."—DANTE.

WHAT a memory it was, that disastrous desert summer of 1942! It began with such a shower of beauty that one might have thought nature was trying to adorn and hide the coming bulk of its disaster and ruin. There was a week of heavy rainfall at the end of March which caused the desert to be covered with a marvellous profusion of grasses and flowers, and these stayed in the wide shallow depressions for weeks after. We were twenty miles south-west of Capuzzo at the time, training with our General Grant tanks, which had not yet been in action on any front, and often in our schemes we ran across these huge pastoral stretches. Even as we churned through them we could smell the beautiful scent, and when we happened to stop among the flowers, to lie down in them and close our eyes was to be in a vivid dream of the England we loved best, for Englishmen who at home are only concerned with Saturday's dog-racing and the stock market will brim over at the eyes in sudden nostalgia at the sight of the image of an English wild flower when abroad. "We might almost be in England!" is the marvelling exclamation.

The spring bore on into April, flaunting its lengthening days of endless sun and cool fluttering winds, oblivious to the mounting expectation and dread in every heart on the harsh desert. Germans attack? Not yet, they can't be quite ready after their rush to Gazala. What about us attacking? Armour not ready yet—probably would be by the end of May or the beginning of June. Jerry might be ready first. Less and less each day the green grass waved and bowed in the fresh breezes, and more and more the brown grass rattled in the dry wind. The flowers became paler, resolutely holding up their threatened heads on their dry stalks at midday, and waiting in pain for the reviving dew of the desert night to strengthen them for a still hotter day.

While we were south-west of Capuzzo, and had plenty of spare time in between the training schemes, I went down to the scene of the brigade's first battle in the previous winter's campaign, at Gabr Taib-el-Essem on the Trigh-el-Abd, to look for the grave of my friend Hugh, whom I had helped to bury on the night of 20th November. His body had been brought in at dusk, and we had buried him early that night at brigade headquarters, which had moved off long before first light next morning, so that we were unable to determine the exact location of the grave. I had been in touch with his wife and brother, and had promised them that I would do my best to find it. I found that the battle-field had been cleared except for a few battered German tanks and occasional piles of shell-cases to show where there had been battery positions. Only the masses of tank track-marks and rusty solid shot remained to remind me of that appalling holocaust of the 20th, the most noisy and concentrated battle in my experience, for on a front of only three miles there had been a hundred and sixty-eight German tanks and a hundred and twenty of ours, and each tank had fired an average of two hundred and fifty shells in an hour and a half before night fell. As well as the tank guns there had been a regiment of R.H.A. and the German divisional artillery firing. We had been pushed back mile after mile, keeping in one line and countering enemy attempts to outflank us by clever juggling with reserve squadrons on the part of the brigadier, and an overcast night had come just in time to prevent the enemy profiting from our growing disorder. During the night Jerry had withdrawn towards Sidi Rezegh with us on his tail, and Hugh's grave had been left behind with the other human and mechanical contents of the grim day's reliquary. It was no wonder that I was unable to find the two petrol tins which I had filled with sand and stones and placed on the spot before taking the swig of brandy I had felt the occasion demanded. I cruised up and down the area, crossing and re-crossing the patches of stunted scrub, churned-up sand and low ridges, rushing straight towards anything that glinted and searching for a spot which resembled the slight gravelly rise of which I had a dim mental

picture from that dark cloudy night. I had some trouble with a small emergency landing ground which had been cleared near by, and wondered if Hugh's grave had been obliterated during its construction. Finally I gave up the search and made for the burnt-out Mark IV tank I had used as a landmark on the trip down, to set a northward course for the regimental leaguer, whose vehicles began to dot the shimmering mirage when I was still about four miles away. Later the padre motored over to Gabr Taib-el-Essem to try and locate Hugh's grave, but he met with no more success than I. Hugh's bones were not found, and I suppose never will be found, but the Hugh I knew has never been lost. Once, returning from a Cairo symphony concert in a taxi, we had sung the slow movement of Haydn's Clock Symphony as a waltz, a tango, a quick fox-trot and finally as a rumba. We had played squash and tennis at Gezireh club, we had organized a regimental concert together down in the sand-hills midway between the Pyramids and Sakkhara, and together we had reformed the world under a silent moonlit Sphinx. The disposal of his bones did not worry me, but while I was in the area where he was killed, the bright deserted silence of the place could not keep the dead life from me.

After a short stay near Capuzzo, where the desert was rather rough and stony, and the nights were a little disturbed by the bumping sounds of Jerry attacking railhead and the lazily curling webs of tracer shells which billowed upwards in the distant sky, we moved down to a remote and virgin stretch of desert near Bir-el-Gobi which seemed to have missed the violence and tactical fluctuation of the battle there a few days after Sidi Rezegh, and was untouched except for a couple of unexploded bombs just outside our squadron area. Here we settled down to a desert life of quiet occupations and plenty of leisure. Being the reconnaissance squadron of the regiment, with light tanks, whenever the regimental leaguer was formed we were placed between the regiment and the enemy, even if the latter were seventy miles away, and thus in a permanent leaguer we avoided the ploughed-up area where the heavy tanks milled about and the dust and constant traffic of regi-

mental headquarters made the desert obnoxious.

The tanks were spread in an irregular circle round the cook-house lorry and the officers' mess, which was also squadron headquarters. Digging of slit trenches, camouflaging of tanks, lorries and trenches, and obliterating of track-marks went on in the sweltering peace of the first day, while the seven officers took turns at digging in the mess. The mess corporal and batmen might dig the mess latrine and slit trenches for the officers, but the actual mess was always hewn out of the desert by us, a pit sixteen feet long and ten feet wide and varying in depth from two to four feet, according to the presence or absence of underlying rock.

Having performed all regimental routine requirements, the next thing was to find by fair or foul play a source of water which would increase our ration and enable us to drink and wash more. We had a transport corporal called Kershaw, a remarkable man who could travel in unerring straight lines across the desert as far as he was asked to go in a three-ton lorry, using only the most rudimentary compass, and he was always entrusted with the job of finding a well which did not belong to any particular formation. The order would go round, "Containers to Corporal Kershaw's lorry," and he would set off in the morning with a lorry load of German water-cans (far better than ours, and therefore strictly forbidden by the "Q" staff, and therefore, also, universally carried by fighting units) and his daily rations. He would slowly bumble off across the desert, his empty cans clattering as his faithful lorry jerked over the rough going, to return at dusk with his map covered with far-reaching lines and with strange Arab names on his lips. Very occasionally he would return, stand penitently to attention and announce complete failure or a promise for the morrow, more usually he would come in and draw himself up with the exhausted pride of a man who has done his best, and announce the discovery of a well whose water was only fit for washing, while on one or two rare but blessed occasions he would enter, dusty and triumphant, to proclaim the attachment of a drinking-water well to the squadron's water resources. Then, of course, we had to tell

regimental headquarters, who tried to avoid telling brigade, and we were lucky indeed if the discovery of water in a well did not lead to the well being put out of bounds to the regiment.

One day Kershaw discovered a well which was actually not marked on the map, one which contained perfectly good water. It was felt in the regiment that this feat demanded some recognition, and when the information was passed to the staff the well was called "Bir-el-Kershaw". Whether subsequently the cartographical staff were disturbed by the German advance before they had time to record the new well with its strange name, or whether the well revels in its name in the solitude of a part of the desert now free from machines and mad Europeans, I do not know. Perhaps the name has reached the Bedouin and Senussi who will have drifted back to their old coastal watering area now that the war has left the continent, and they shake their heads over the queer English word—but anyway, Kershaw himself will always be known to those who reaped the benefit of his labours as Bir-el-Kershaw.

Kershaw became the toast of the squadron, for about the middle of April the slowly warming oven of the desert spring began to open its doors little by little and give us the first blasts of the khamsin, and the brewing of tea in the short shadows of the tanks and under the crude tarpaulin shelters increased proportionately. A period of khamsin was always heralded by a drop of the prevailing westerly wind at night, and usually one still following day before the hot air began to come from the south. Then would come three or four days of most uncomfortable heat, not a beating sun-heat relieved by occasional fresh breezes, nor the damp sweltering heat of tropical coasts, but a burning dry heat rushing along in the air we breathed, that air which could flay off our skin if we spent a day out in it without muffling our faces. During the first day of a khamsin work went on as usual, but on the second day we worked for a rather shorter period if the sand was not too thick in the air. The third day found us stumbling against the oven-blasts to our tanks like so many explorers in

an Arctic blizzard, and came back to the mess early to drink quantities of lime-juice and water, while if there was a fourth day the sand was often so thick in the air that we had to set a compass course to visit our tanks, which were only three or four hundred yards away across level desert. As far as visibility is concerned, the khamsin wind from the south does not usually pick up as much sand as the prevailing westerly winds do when they reach gale force, as they do, often in winter and seldom in summer, and it is the paralysing heat of the khamsin which makes it the most dreaded season of the year. A period of khamsin is ended by the type of sandstorm which appears at the beginning of the film *Desert Victory*. It appears first as a yellow smudge far away to the west, gradually looms up the burning sky, and advances eastward as a wall several hundred feet high, with on its front face coiling pillars of sand writhing upwards and vast irregular promontories jutting out from its overpeering bulk. Magnificent and silent, it advances at great speed, engulfing the distant shimmering mirages forced from the sky by the burning sun, then swiftly smothering the farthest vehicles. When this type of storm was about four miles away, we closed the end of the mess facing south-west, piling sand and rocks on the end of the lorry-cover we used as a tent, and opened the north-eastern end. We stood outside, marvelling at the extraordinary spectacle, and knowing that the fiery dominion of the khamsin was almost over. Richard once took a photograph when the top of the great dust-cloud was midway between the western horizon and the blue zenith, but the man who developed the film did not understand what was the object of the photograph, and returned the negative, saying, "This one hasn't come out." The negative showed half bright sky and half dull opacity, a perfect reproduction of the scene. The first vehicles of the regiment were swamped, then we could hear a faint rustling like a million giant hour-glasses running out together, and then we were in it. Oh, cool cool, dark dark, and we laughed and shouted for joy as we stood in the cool dusty air with our shirts off, while the myriad swirling particles settled on our body surfaces which were damp and sticky with sweat

after three or four days of khamsin. It was in a curious rustling atmosphere that we lived for the rest of the day, for although the storm moved across the desert at perhaps sixty or eighty miles an hour, the speed of the air inside it was not greater than that of a fresh breeze. And yet in it, towering up in muffling permeations of the air to hundreds of feet above the ground, were draped enormous veils of the dust of the desert.

The dawn after the culmination of such a storm usually began a heaven of summer. In the clear air left by the vanished upheaval a single sparkling cloud on the eastern horizon took to itself the whole range of hues borne by the pristine herald-lights of the sun deity, underlining the pale morning star. A frill of brilliant light which seemed to wear away the edge of the horizon appeared, and there the sun rose a minute or two later, and quickly hoisted its lower rim clear of the earth. At once the horizon was broken and adorned in many places with shimmering seas of blue mirage, intersected with arms and islands of illusory land, and the single cloud was burnt to a silver ember which soon floated out of the sun's furnace and was relegated to the sky as pink and grey ash cooling to white. Level and wide, the ruddy brown desert emphasized the height and splendour of the morning, only adding to its beauty the pink suffusion of a small tent and the silhouette of an occasional pile of rocks. And into such a wide morning, out of sleeping-bags, blankets and bivouacs, poked hundreds of tousled heads, soared several lustily singing voices, and roared the sound of the cooker from beside the cook-house lorry, as the regiment awoke, approved of the change in the weather, and prepared itself for a fine day. From the cook-house a few minutes later came the clatter of a man beating an empty petrol tin with a shovel and a raucous voice bellowing, "Come and get it!" and in twos and threes the tank and lorry crews ambled across the intervening distance, with their knives and forks clinking against their mess-tins. Breakfast in the mess followed, an almost visionary meal from the mind of our mess corporal, tea, bacon, fried bread, bread and margarine and marmalade, sometimes

preceded by grapefruit, with everyone wearing a clean shirt and feeling respectable for the first time in days.

One day we had a squadron gymkhana, whose opening event was the judging of a scavenging hunt which had been going on for the previous forty-eight hours. The entrants had to produce such items as the top of a beer bottle (beer was coming into the desert in tins at that period), a blue flower (the only flowers to be found in this part of the desert were small blue ones which blossomed every morning after the dew beside patches of scrub, and disappeared before midday), a live desert creature, a list of the squadron officers' Christian names, a piece of money of non-Egyptian currency, a "feelthy peecture", and one or two items representative of Egyptian night life. Extra marks were awarded for the most original object produced. This gave scope to the imaginative men, and some marvellous things appeared, an English pound note, a young rabbit (officially there are no rabbits in the desert, only a few hares), a leaf from some South African tree, a small dog which we had not seen hanging about the squadron area, and best of all, an item of A.T.S. equipment.

The gymkhana took place on a smooth and level patch of baked clay. There were various team and individual events all designed to raise mirth, and the best of these was the bully-beef eating contest. The last event was a timed contest in which teams of four men had to jack up a three-ton lorry, take off a rear wheel, roll it round the lorry, put on the wheel again, and let down the lorry (bolts were tested for tightness after the competitors had finished). Everyone was so exhausted after the two lorry contests that there was a general shout for a team of officers to give a demonstration of wheel-changing. We went at it like mad, but although we were fairly efficient, we rolled the wheel crookedly and lost several valuable seconds, so that there was only one troop whose team did it more slowly than we did. However, honour was satisfied, and the men saw what they wanted to see, namely four panting, sweating and dishevelled officers reeling brokenly towards the mess and crying out to the mess corporal for lime-juice.

One day somebody found a large scorpion spider and presented it to the squadron leader who, much to our fear, put it in a glass jar in a position of honour in the mess and said he was going to fatten it up and match it against the first large scorpion that could be found. The champion wore himself out trying to escape during his first few hours of captivity, and then fell into a torpor from which even the tastiest morsels of the best mess in the regiment, proffered by the senior officer's hand, failed to rouse him. For some days no suitable opponent was found for him, and then, in disgust at his unwarlike bearing, Richard put in the glass jar a small yellow scorpion, and there the two ill-assorted arachnids sat, so close that they must have felt each other's breath, but taking not the slightest notice of each other. The less warlike members of the mess claimed that this cowardly behaviour on the part of the contestants made them unfit for their position of honour, so they were put outside the mess on the ground, while Richard sighed deeply at the failure to produce a battle. But he still clung to the hope that a large black scorpion might be found which would rouse the ire of the champion, and every day he asked us what luck we had had.

We spent our evenings in the rather confined space of the mess reading, writing and chatting, and having an occasional party either by ourselves or with officers from other squadrons, so that gradually we got to know each other and make allowances for the little ways each of us had. We knew that we would be fighting again soon, and although we hoped each party would be the last we never made the impending battle an excuse for a carouse. Our parties were simply ebullitions independent of the stress of that waiting period, yet we always awoke from them feeling strangely closer to zero hour, so that they fostered a comradeship which was cast in a battle mould. The longer we stayed together the better we got on, and on these nights of drinking we reached a level of intimate and irresponsible hilarity which I have not known before or since.

Did Fate visit us in those days, wondering whom to take as she watched us in our characteristic attitudes? Six feet four of Oscar Stoward, sometimes banging his long hand on the table

and giving bad imitations of people, and sometimes convulsing in what I can only call a gargantuan snigger. A swaying Geoffrey Rawlins arguing serio-comically and holding out a deprecatory hand to the avalanche of ribald remarks, then laughing so much that he could not continue. Leslie Potter hunched up over the table, tipping his glass and giggling at it with one eye shut in between his outbursts of rhetorical night-club French. Richard Ward swinging with one hand from the lorry superstructure we used as a roof, with a glass in his other hand, stamping both feet and raising a cloud of dust, and singing our appalling songs with a frowning concentration. "Tiger" Lyon-Williams, who did not usually know the words of the songs, following someone else's mouth with his eyes and occasionally emitting tuneless blasts when we arrived at the chorus. And Tony Driver, eternally filling the mess with blue clouds from the pipe he sucked, and theorizing about life. And myself. This was the team.

We were always put on so many hours' notice to move while we were in the desert, so that we knew in what state of permanent readiness we had to be. The notice often changed. Usually it was about six hours, then if there was a "flap" up at the front it would change to two, and occasionally we would be moved to demonstrate our adherence to orders. But while we were on our clean stretch of desert down near Bir-el-Gobi at six hours' notice and happily dug in, with our washing out on the scrub and our bedclothes airing on the ground, we were suddenly ordered to move in half an hour's time. No one knew why, and there was no information of any kind except our destination, a spot south-east of Bir Hacheim, but we did it all right, imagining that Jerry had started something suddenly and caught the staff with its trousers down.

But when we arrived at our new area we settled down almost at once into the same existence, training as hard as the mileage allowance of our tanks would permit, and perfecting ourselves in the technique of such abstruse sciences as firing machine-guns accurately at ranges so great that the fall of shot could not be observed. For nearly all our firing practices we swanned ten miles southwards to a wide depressed saltpan called

Baltet-esc-Sciausc, where the surface was so smooth that at the highest speed of any vehicle no vibration was felt. The place abounded with tarantula spiders of a size I have never seen equalled, with festering gingery hairs on their bodies and legs which made them truly repulsive. There was a derelict Mark III tank at which we used to fire, and every time it was hit Richard zoomed up to it in his staff car and marked the spot with a chalk cross. We had to place two look-out tanks on the flanks at the target end to warn the firing-point by wireless if anyone approached, but it was such a remote spot that only once were we disturbed. Checking targets and supervising firing in that brilliant light depression was the hottest and most glaring work I have ever done. Once, just before the squadron had finished a firing practice on one of the hottest khamsin days, we saw a huge dust-cloud approaching from the west, and Richard ordered troops to return to the leaguer with all speed the moment they had finished and told me to bring back the last party. I was the squadron navigator, and was always given jobs like this because I liked them. Just before we started back the wall of dust reached us. Visibility was not reduced to less than two hundred yards, but nightfall was less than an hour away, and if we did not want to be benighted we would have to get cracking. I set a course, and we started off, never dropping below twenty miles an hour in a swift glide through the cool thick atmosphere which brought us home in under the half-hour. A wash in cold water, two or three drinks, and supper. Heaven.

During the necessarily long periods between schemes we were often hard put to it to keep the men interested and amused, so that I had to fall back on French and Arabic lessons and reading of enemy documents. I found the most popular form of instruction was the military and general knowledge competition, which covered everything from technical questions on the tank to the name of Charles II's most famous mistress.

Our colonel, Lieutenant-Colonel Uniacke, whom Cecil Beaton described as "the handsomest man outside films", put up a prize for a limerick competition in which the first

lines had to end with the names of one of three local places, Bir Belchonfus, Baltet-esc-Sciausc, and Agheila (not the one on the Libya-Tripolitania frontier). The date fixed for judging entries unhappily coincided with the date of Rommel's summer adventure, so that none of the ingenious rhymes for Belchonfus and Sciausc saw the light. But we were able to enjoy the regimental gymkhana on a neighbouring baltet. It was an elaborate edition of the squadron show we had had east of Bir-el-Gobi, having several of the same events and one or two very funny things. The long-distance spitting competition (down wind) was invented and judged by the colonel himself, and brought into the limelight several people who had never shone in regimental sporting activities. The lorry-pushing contest was more difficult than ours, as the lorries had to snake between flag-poles half-way to the finishing post. There was a nasty trick event for "a loud-voiced soldier and an officer with a good sense of direction" from each squadron. Soldiers and officers were separated by about eighty yards, and a succession of obstacles such as ropes, rocks and nets was placed in between. Officers were then blindfolded, and told that on the word "Go!" they had to run to their soldiers, who would guide them and give them instructions how to overcome the obstacles. Needless to say, just before the word "Go!" the obstacles were removed, and all the contestants had to do was to run up a lane of madly excited men to their opposite numbers. The thing finished with one poor blindfold officer trotting across the desert and feeling forward with outstretched hands, and the whole regiment striding behind him chanting instructions. Then there was a fancy-dress contest. Judging was very difficult, for the judges had to choose between such diverse representations as a perfect meditating Gandhi, an abusive Hitler, an Arab seller of street literature, two fast young ladies from the Sharia Wagh-el-Berka, a lunatic, and a German airman complete with Iron Cross. The gymkhana was a great success. It was a token of the understanding between officers and men, a final cementing together of the various stones in the edifice of the regiment before it was put to the test.

Early in May a German staff officer was captured while sitting on the edge of a mine-field poring over his map, an unpleasant hectoring fellow of the type which responds to psychological treatment. The story went round the desert that he was encouraged to drink during an evening of wine and memories at some headquarters, and became so inflated with pride of race and intoxication that he gave some interesting facts about the Russian front, from which he had been transferred recently. He also said that the date for Rommel's attack on the Gazala position was 24th May. He rather took the attitude that the war in the desert was a side-line to which Germany had condescended in order to save Italy, and he must have felt very annoyed at being put in the bag so ignominiously. 24th May—we could now look forward to a date and wonder whether the Germans really would attack before the 9th June, the mooted date for the opening of the British offensive. The idea was, "Let the Germans attack, and hooray for our counter-offensive!"

Desert life became more and more refined when railhead was moved up to Sidi Rezegh, and the "Q" staff excelled itself, causing the canteens and officers' clothing shops to be well stocked and the daily rations to be varied and plentiful. The weather improved as the khamsin season wore on, and the gaps between the periods of south wind became longer and longer. Lorry-loads of men were sent off periodically for twenty-four hours beside the sea, where there were canteen and concert arrangements made for them. The only enemy planes we ever saw were an Me 110 escorted by two 109s, which came over nearly every day on their tactical reconnaissance, carefully choosing a period after one massive British fighter sweep and before another. The desert to the north was becoming uncomfortably full of troops, and we mentally patted ourselves on the back for being in the Seventh Armoured Division and possessing the glorious privacy of the southern flank. From the 20th May to 1st June everyone in the desert was to stand-to an hour before dawn and an hour before dusk, said a general order. Less sleep, thought the army, and cursed, hoping for the battle to begin soon.

Our brigade was suddenly moved northwards to Abiar-el-Mesterdat, a move we thoroughly deplored (fancy having to live in an area where other troops have been, we thought!), but we set to work with gusto, burying other people's rubbish and trying to dig in the mess in this new and strange rocky soil. A great sigh, a great yawn, war is long periods of waiting—

We stood-to as usual on the 27th May, a dull dawn whose deformed clouds seemed to promise a high wind. Richard came tearing back from regimental headquarters in his staff car and told us that two German armoured divisions had rounded Bir Hacheim. They were just about on our old leaguer area. Our tanks moved off at once in their billows of crumbling dust, and I, as the one captain in the regiment who had to be left out of the first battle together with one major and two subalterns, remained to gather the squadron mess and cook-house lorries and take them over to the transport echelon. We formed up and began to move eastwards to our rendezvous. I knew that I would be in a tank in a few days' time, and began calculating the chances of the battle. The estimated number of Axis tanks which I had last seen in an intelligence summary was 583, of which 460 were supposed to be German. As far as I knew we had about 700, of which only 200 had seventy-five-millimetre guns and the rest two-pounders. Eastwards we went.

I was travelling beside Leslie Sherley-Price, the commander of the echelon, and when we were near to the El Adem-Bir-el-Gobi track he pointed out to me a landmark a thousand yards away to the south and told me to find out what it was so that he could check his position. When I had only two hundred yards to go I saw a German Mark III tank bumbling along in the opposite direction about a hundred yards away. Looking beyond it, I saw several more in the haze between the masses of British transport. I came back to Leslie, who turned northwards. There was the transport of two divisions with enemy tanks jogging along with them, quite unable to cope with the situation. Very few of that huge number of vehicles were captured, for they all jogged northwards and stopped when

they were clear of the shelling, moving on again when the shells began to drop amongst them. This confusion very soon righted itself—inexplicably to us—and I was sent up to the tanks with a refuelling column, and was able to find out why the Germans had not gone on chasing our transport right into the sea. One of their armoured divisions had met our brigade and lost sixty-five tanks. The first one had been knocked out by an R.H.A. six-pounder at a range of 2,200 yards, and obviously this gun and the seventy-five-millimetre on the heavy tanks had come as a complete surprise to them. Only the enemy flanking force had blundered into our transport, and this had been speedily withdrawn to cope with the strong British opposition.

After this morning battle, during which our divisional headquarters was captured (General Messervy escaped by taking off his badges of rank, digging with a party of men, and getting away at night), the brigade was ordered to fall back on the position south of El Adem and bar the road to Tobruk. Here we battled for the rest of the day with the German 90th Light Division, while the Panzer Divisions were drawn off westward and had a tremendous fight with our First Armoured Division. We had to put up with some pretty heavy shelling, but the tanks easily held off the attack. At the time I was up with brigade headquarters with a small packet of six ammunition and petrol lorries, and we had to sit up on top of a bare escarpment for two hours before the transport was sent down it to the north. On the way down a shell landed by the lorry nearest to me. I went over and heaved out the two men, who had been hit so severely that their bones crunched when I lifted them, but the lorry itself was completely unharmed and was driven down the hill with its load of ammunition by Oscar's batman Iddon, who was travelling with me in the staff car. At the bottom of the hill the two men died, and we put them in an old slit trench and covered them with earth, saluting them in the absence of a padre and getting an exact location so that they could be buried properly later on. I did not like throwing earth on their faces.

The Germans disengaged, and the brigade prepared to re-

capture its own dumps at Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh, where the advance units of the enemy were reported to be having a high old time completely unmolested. It was getting towards dusk when the tanks came down the hill, and the brigadier hastened the evening business as much as possible with the idea of getting possession of our supplies before nightfall. The whole brigade moved very fast eastwards across the plain which, being near the coast, was still verdant after the spring rains, and we brushed aside the light opposition we met, sending streams of machine-gun tracer bullets into the gathering eastern gloom. I felt a great exultation in the power and magnificent working efficiency of this force which had fought all day and still had the energy to roll up the enemy as dark was falling. Early next morning we found the area to be clear of the enemy, who had left behind a number of light vehicles, and we mounted the Sidi Rezegh escarpment to the south and moved quickly westwards.

While on the move we were ordered to the crossroads at El Adem aerodrome to prepare to fight against the hundred German tanks which had got through to Acroma and were expected to push south-eastwards. On the way there we underwent some shelling from the butterfly 90th Light Division, which had reappeared south of El Adem when our brigade had gone eastward. The threat from the hundred German tanks did not materialize, and it was decided to teach these German infantrymen a lesson, using only our regiment and its quota of artillery and infantry support. We went southward very fast, but after a sharp engagement the enemy ran away to the south-west so quickly that it was thought not worth while to chase them. We returned to El Adem a little disappointed, but with our tails up and immense confidence in the defeat of the enemy. We spent the night huddled together in broad moonlight at the El Adem crossroads, and only received about three of the hundred bombs we so richly deserved. When they dropped I happened to be inside the Armoured Command vehicle talking with the brigade major, a strange man of boundless enthusiasm who loved explosions of all kinds and was always easy to find in a battle because of

the red fore-and-aft cap he wore and his position on the roof of a vehicle with his eyes glued to binoculars—watching explosions. I am sure that the tactical situation was only a secondary consideration with him, for his excitement always increased as the battle came nearer, and he literally sighed with satisfaction when shells began to land among the head-quarter vehicles. I shudder to think what course his childhood must have taken.

So far the regiment had lost no tanks in action, and on the first day we had knocked out ten German tanks. Now on the third day the brigade was sent round to the south side of the "Cauldron" which was then forming east of the Gazala mine-field, and the regiment took over a position from a regiment with a smaller proportion of heavy tanks sitting opposite a dug-in Jerry gun position which was covering the enemy lines of communication at Harmat. After a brief reconnaissance the colonel decided to attack at once, although the regiment from which he took over told him it was madness. The battle which followed was perhaps the best demonstration of the efficiency and power of the regiment. Twenty high-velocity guns of a calibre which would pierce the tanks were knocked out for the loss of three tanks. Night fell, and the Germans went away, leaving behind the knocked-out guns and many dead. The best performance of a day of high valour and devastating efficiency was that of a man who was driving the officer commanding a troop of three tanks. When they were charging an eighty-eight-millimetre gun, the gun fired at them from about a hundred yards and the shell put the turret and its crew out of action, killing the officer. When the driver heard no instructions from the internal communication set, he accelerated and ran over the gun with its crew of ten or eleven.

As a result of this action the brigade was astride the enemy lines of communication. During the whole of this day my squadron, the light tanks, had been roaming about shooting and capturing helpless enemy transport to the south and west of the Gazala mine-field. From this dominating position we were removed next day. A German staff officer, talking to an

Englishman some time later, said that the German Command could not understand why the British, having made great and successful efforts to establish an armoured brigade across their lines of communication, withdrew it and permitted their supplies to reach them once more.

On 2nd June, when the brigade was on the north side of the Cauldron near Tamar, and I was still messing about in Richard's staff car with petrol and ammunition columns, there was a sudden heavy khamsin which began at eleven o'clock in the morning and reduced visibility to less than a hundred yards. The battle had to stop, but brains went on working, and it was decided that the moment the storm stopped the regiment was to attack some guns to the south, and the R.H.A. six-pounders and half the light squadron under Oscar were to go westwards through a gap in the mine-field and play with some enemy transport which had been observed there. At about six o'clock the hottest and most violent khamsin I had ever known stopped, and the enemy vehicles beyond the mine-field were seen to be concentrating and moving towards us, led by tanks. The regiment, already on its way south, had suddenly to deal with a flank attack from fifty German tanks which moved very fast towards them. There was no time to take up a position. Every tank did a right turn and came into action as quickly as possible. The six R.H.A. six-pounders knocked out fifteen enemy tanks before their gun positions were overrun and their light tank destroyed. Magnificent to the last, they got all their wounded away under heavy machine-gun fire, and had fifty casualties, one of them an N.C.O. who, after one arm had been blown off, ran across open ground to put out a fire on somebody else's vehicle. The next day they got back their six-pounders intact, for Jerry had withdrawn after the battle. The regiment lost nine out of twelve heavy tanks and two light tanks, destroying ten German tanks.

The colonel, coming out of action, saw a man on the ground with his arm blown off, and stopped his tank; he coolly got out into a hail of fire and picked him up before continuing on his way. His tank was hit and stopped, and he gave the

order to bale out. When they arrived on the ground they were machine-gunned, and ran round to the other side of the tank, where they were machine-gunned again, and had to get under it. The colonel said, "Sorry to have dropped you boys in the cart. If you ever get out of this go two and three-quarter miles north-east and you'll find brigade." Then a shell hit the tank, killing all but two, including the colonel. The regiment was in mourning, for he was loved as a man and revered as a commander. His voice on the wireless during a battle—all tank battles depend on wireless—was clear and sane and protecting, and the regiment worked to it in perfect harmony.

Richard said afterwards that it was the most savage battle in which he had ever been, Richard who in France had come back in a tank with thirteen holes in it, and in the previous winter's battle had had six tanks knocked out under him. In this battle he was by the colonel in his light tank and joined the rough line formed by the regiment. His tank was hit eight times. Two of his crew were killed, and I met his wounded driver nine months later in Italy. Richard baled out, with only metal splash on both of his legs, and met the adjutant, Stinker Adams, who had emerged from the affair of the colonel's tank with a flesh wound on his neck. They lay down in the desert until a German walked up to them and pointed to the direction in which they were to go, thinking that they were privates, as they were wearing no badges of rank. To Stinker he pointed out a German doctor who had driven up in a tank which had a red cross on its turret and was fitted up as a surgery. Together Richard and Stinker walked away, Stinker swearing that he wasn't going to let any bloody Jerry dress his wound, and lay down again when they were fairly certain that no one was watching them. From here they watched the Germans blowing up their own knocked-out tanks, and when night fell they walked home. Two valuable officers saved by the simple expedient of not wearing their crowns and pips.

The battle had begun so suddenly that the forward replenishing lorries travelling behind regimental headquarters did

not have time to get away, and some of them went up in flames almost at once. In the intense concentration of fire of all kinds Geoffrey Warner, our padre, went round in his staff car picking up men he could see on the ground. He told me afterwards that two of them, although uninjured, were so stunned by the violence of the affair that they gaped up at him from the ground uncomprehendingly, and he had to leave them. One of the light tanks got away with several of the crews of knocked-out tanks on the back of it, but arrived out of the danger area with only splashes of blood on the outside.

"Tiger" Lyon-Williams had been sent out on an eerie mission while the khamsin was blowing, and at one period during the afternoon he had rung up to say that he had some German prisoners and what should he do with them? It was the last we heard from him. In the thick atmosphere he must have been amongst German vehicles without knowing it, for I next heard of him in Italy.

After this nasty business the regiment re-formed in less than twenty-four hours with new tanks at a strength of only two squadrons, one heavy and one light, and at last I got a troop of tanks. From this time onwards my recollections of the tactical situation and dates are rather hazy, because I was no longer sitting in a staff car with a map and field-glasses, marking in the dispositions of other formations after every visit to the brigade command vehicle. I gladly sorted out and put on a tank my minimum requirements, a valise containing a sleeping-bag, a bottle of whisky, a bottle of eau-de-Cologne, and a clean change, and a small haversack containing my mess-tin, mug, knife, fork and spoon, note-book, spare pencils, and one book. This book was the Oxford edition of *Six Elizabethan Plays*, and I found the full-blooded variety of these plays made them more satisfying reading in a battle than the familiar sentimental pageant provided by the average anthology. I found I could turn happily at any moment to such diverse situations as the court scene in Webster's "White Devil" and the scene outside the barber's shop in "The Knight of the Burning Pestle".

The next battle we had was on the same day as the costly failure to block the enemy's western communications by an attack from the north. We were on the left of the tank brigade which was doing this attack, and I was ordered to be in contact with them as soon after first light as possible. I found them forming up for the attack and by taking up a good position of observation I was able to give the regiment a running commentary on the progress of the affair. It was a heavy attack on a narrow front, with massed infantry vehicles moving down the slope into the haze immediately behind the tanks. The German position was in low-lying ground, and into this our tanks disappeared, to reappear on the rising ground on their left flank, that is to say directly in front of me. Almost at once, from the south-east, the Germans launched a violent counter-attack, their tanks advancing in waves. The front wave advanced under cover of fire from the stationary second wave, then the second wave advanced under cover of fire from the first wave, and so on until the opposing tank forces were within a hundred yards of each other. I could see the sand being blasted away from the front of each tank by every discharge of a gun, for they were less than fifteen hundred yards away. The position of the German tanks offered a glorious chance for our brigade to hit them in the flank, but we had not been ordered to co-operate, and I had the shame of seeing our heavy tanks roll up just after it was all over and the Germans had consolidated their position by pushing some twenty or so Mark IIIs and IVs up the slope towards me, causing me to withdraw a few minutes after the defeated vehicles of the brigade on my right.

The heavy tanks of my regiment took up a position facing south, and sat all day opposite the twenty German tanks. There was a valley behind the German tanks where a lot of movement was going on, but try as I might from my position on the flank, I could not find out what was happening there. Whenever I thought there was a chance I advanced alone slowly, without kicking up any dust, but every time the Germans shelled me out of it. They would let me get a certain distance without even ranging on me, then suddenly they

would send four shells at once in the hope of knocking me out. I remember watching one shell explode behind my tank, which sent a large fragment of metal backwards in a high curve to drop amongst the firewood on the back of my tank. It was an interesting and exciting day during which danger seemed remote, so remote that we were able to have eight cups of tea by carefully camouflaged "brewing-up" close behind the tank; but we heard that there was to be an evening hate. It started at about five o'clock. I streaked forward and to the right with six light tanks to secure the regiment's flank while the heavy tanks rumbled forward. I had been ordered to "demonstrate" with these six light tanks, which just had to conform to me as they had no wireless, so we milled about madly, forming a line every minute or two and firing at the five stationary tanks which were covering the enemy's left flank. Behind me there was fun. The valley into which I had been denied observation by the enemy was full of tanks, and these came out at great speed to drive off the regiment's twelve heavy tanks. When we were withdrawing I saw a lot of pathetic figures running from three burning tanks amid the German machine-gun bullets and solid shot, so I went with my tanks to pick them up. We got them away, but I lost one of my light tanks doing it. I was sent back a few minutes later to try and get it from under the watchful eyes of the enemy. I reached it and found it had had one of its tracks shot off, so that my driver, Ryder (the man who was subsequently killed in my tank at El Alamein), and I had to get out of my tank and break the other track to make it possible for the knocked-out tank to be towed. It was a little frightening, as we were at the spot where the tanks had been knocked out and in full view of the German tanks, but they never fired a single shot at us, and we got the tank away amid cheers.

The heavy tanks had knocked out five German tanks before withdrawing, so that at least we were up on the day's reckoning. The unpleasant thing about desert fighting in the summer, I discovered that day, was that when an enemy high-velocity gun fired at me, I could follow the course of the shell because as it was travelling in a flat trajectory close to the

ground, its vacuum stirred up a small cloud of sand which followed it to its destination.

The battle went on. We had to get up at four o'clock in the mornings in the light squadron, to be ready to push out towards the enemy at first light, and start sending back information as soon as it was light enough to see. When I got up in the dark, dragged on my boots, had a mouthful of whisky, wiped my face with eau-de-Cologne, tied my bed-roll on to the tank, and climbed in and began fumbling with the head-phones over a face which had not been shaved for days, I felt as if I had been doing the same thing every day of my life. Then I looked round to see if my other two tanks were ready, and if they were, I gave them the signal to start before giving my driver the "advance". Then came the shake of my little tank as the gear was put in, and the homely kick in the back from the uncomfortable little turret as the clutch plate gripped and jerked us forwards into the terrifying unknown gloom or mist. Once the lights began to play in the east, full daylight came quickly and mercifully, and very soon I was wiping the damp off my forehead and screwing up my eyes in the glare, trying to identify vehicles in the shimmering mirage. Reporting, reporting, reporting, with the head-phones pressing uncomfortably on my ears and sending rattling sounds and voices, clear and distorted, round and round my head. Two hours perhaps, or three, of intermittent shelling and swanning about to find the best position of observation, then Richard's welcome voice came over the air to tell me that Leslie or Tony or Geoffrey was coming to relieve me, and I turned round every few moments to watch for the three plumes of dust to detach themselves from the thick cluster of vehicles and move towards me, resolving themselves gradually into three little tanks. Then when they got close two of them stopped, and the officer came up in his tank to get the "gen" from me before his troop took up position. Invariably this pow-wow began with a detailed description of the breakfast he had just eaten, and whichever of us had done first turn on patrol became faint with anticipation, magnifying the hollowness of his inside until he felt he was about to

satisfy a week's hunger. After all the information was passed, I moved slowly away so as not to excite the enemy, and then when I was out of their view I raced for the comforting group of regimental vehicles, refilled with petrol, and with ammunition if I had fired any, and then got down to the serious business of cooking breakfast.

This was undoubtedly the best time of the day during a battle, breakfast-time. Sometimes it was disturbed by a sudden move, while often occasional shells were dropping in the vicinity, with odd lumps of solid shot or duds flumping down and little jagged bits whirring past unheeded in the air, but unless we were denied breakfast altogether nothing could tarnish the bright benison of that rough and satisfying meal beside the tank. I came back from reporting to Richard to find a fire blazing merrily beside the tank, with one man wiping clean and laying out the eating utensils and mugs on the front mudguard, another waiting for the dixie to boil with a bag of tea, a bag of sugar, a tin of milk and a spoon all ready, and the third opening a tin of sausages or bacon. If it was bacon, he unrolled it from the grease-proof paper, and the sticky paper dangled from his fingers, glinting in the sun and twisting in the wind until he shook it off. Tea, the first and most important thing, was made, and all of us squatted or leaned against the tank, sipping noisily and watching the sausages or bacon sizzling, talking about the situation or joking with each other.

At every meal in that summer battle, how we blessed the "Q" staff! There was always plenty of water and plenty of varied food. For the asking, any man could get any item of clothing or equipment free, and the mail came up as regularly as clockwork. As Ryder said, "It makes you feel you've got something to fight for, doesn't it, sir?"

After breakfast we usually had an hour or so of rest before going out on patrol again, and I spent this time chatting with Richard or at regimental headquarters trying to get some information about the general situation. Another patrol, and perhaps a move to another part of the front, with the regiment moving in close formation well inside four troops from our

squadron which acted as the eyes of the regiment. I loved the job of reconnaissance in front of the regiment, sailing along with my three little tanks in a privacy of wind and dust, and keeping in sight of the family group of regimental head-quarter tanks whose dark blue pennants rode the billows of dust with a commanding calm at the head of the columns of tanks. When we arrived at our destination there was more reconnaissance and feverish planning during the hottest part of the day.

Little fighting was done between midday and four o'clock. Germans and British alike subsided into a tropical torpor and left their reconnaissance elements out in front to strain their eyes and scorch their skins on the edges of No Man's Land, while the troops rested, following tiny areas of shadow round their vehicles, crawling gruntingly from shadow to shadow with their caps or berets over their eyes, and the commanders sat in their large and shady vehicles poring over maps, endlessly planning while the sweat churned down the furrows in their cheeks. Out on patrol, I found that enemy vehicles which had been clearly visible in the morning swam muzzily in the superincumbent haze which clamped down on the middle period of the day, and I often reported bushes as tanks or lorries, especially when they appeared to move. Even when I checked their position in relation to known fixed objects I could swear they moved, and then when I checked their positions again they had moved back where they came from. After a time the strain of forcing my eyes to pierce the shimmering torrid atmosphere began to tell on me, so that I began to see double and found it painful to use my eyes. I stuck it until I began to fire the machine-gun at bushes, and then when everything had a double outline—even the mug of tea in my hand—I went to Richard and said there was no point in going on. A day or two of sitting in a staff car wearing dark glasses always put me right again, but after each of the three occasions on which I went practically blind in the forty days of battle I found my eyes lasted for a shorter time before becoming useless. My crew were always very amusing when they ragged me about firing at bushes, and the under-

standing between us was so good that there was never a suggestion of contempt on their part nor a defence against contempt on mine.

After the grilling midday inertia the violent children of the brains of the opposing commanders toddled grimly into their evening hate, and the desert rang with confusion, fire, shot and pathetic lost voices striving to make themselves heard above the explosions. I became used to this part of the day which we all hated and yet took for granted, used to the flight of shells in both directions, the sharp crack and whine of our own twenty-five-pounder shells going away and the wail and crump of enemy shells arriving around me, used to the detached crackling of machine-guns, the imperative thunder-crack of the German air-bursting shells, the boom of the South Africans' "Long Toms" and the cataclysmic roar as the R.A.F. unloaded two or three miles in front, but I never got used to the shrill whistle of solid shot flying past and was always relieved when it ended with the flump of the metal bouncing on the ground. Solid shot always had the name of a tank on it. For us in tanks it was the solo voice of the diabolical song, merely hedged about with the remotely discordant choruses of high explosive shells, bombs and machine-guns.

The wind always seemed to be stronger in the last few tortured hours of day than at any other time, and increased the insidious desolation of the battle atmosphere with erratic veils of blown particles which obscured targets and friends alike, interfered with wireless reception and transmission, and wore eyes and faces into a set strained grimace which seemed to be held to the backs of our heads by tightly clamped iron bands. Through these wind-divided veils of dust appeared a line of tanks, firing and further enveloping themselves in the clouds raised by the concussion of the guns discharging, clouds which belched against the main slant of the blowing sand, or a group of transport vehicles, flocking with a sideways motion behind a slight feature which they hoped would protect them from hostile shells; while above and in front and behind could be seen the concentration, lift, and diffusion into

wisps of the black and grey shell-bursts. The distorted and vibrating atmosphere inside head-phones was slivered with jabbered orders and acknowledgments, while sometimes a tank commander left his set on "send" so that the whole regiment heard the deliberate or frantic commands he gave to his crew, and the noise of his guns firing.

At about sunset the wind dropped, and a great outburst of firing proclaimed that both sides could see each other clearly once more. Manœuvre became more violent for a short time as the opposing forces threshed and twisted to seek advantage, and then under the gorgeous evening sky the surface of the desert darkened, so that tanks appeared to each other as black dots in a shadow wilderness which was streaked with white and red tracer and occasionally marked with the bright orange torch of a burning vehicle. As the darkness encroached more and more on the playground of the mad game, the longer range weapons dropped out, and the crystallizing air was only splintered with the reports of tank and anti-tank artillery and the occasional splutter of automatics as some hapless crew who had had to bale out were goaded with a final scourge. Soon it was even too dark for the tanks to fire at each other, and there were no more explosions. But the marvellous ensuing quiet, broken only by the crackle of ammunition going off inside some burning vehicle, afforded only a temporary respite from the torture-screw demands of the battle, for night was the time when manœuvre, replenishment and reorganization were least likely to be interrupted by the enemy.

At dusk the troops of light tanks from my squadron were always left out in position to observe the last visible moves of the enemy and to deny him observation of the regiment forming up, and we were the last to rally with the regiment. We formed up and prepared to move to the spot where we were to meet our transport. Those night marches! Moving on an ordinarily dark night in close column we might cover eight miles in two hours. We were always dead tired, and had to strain eyes, over which we could not put goggles as these obscured visibility, into the thick stinging clouds of dust thrown up by the vehicles in front. I always sat on the front

of the tank beside the driver's opened visor, and moved my hand in front of his face to guide him. If he did not respond to a sign I looked to see whether he had fallen asleep, bellowing in his ear, "All right?" and shaking him by the shoulder. The one consoling mercy of night marches was that we rarely had to keep our wireless sets on, which meant that two members of the crew could go to sleep inside the tank. Once I went to sleep sitting on the outside when we were going along a lane in one of the Tobruk mine-fields, and was not even awakened by the explosions as less fortunate vehicles blundered on to mines. The marches went on interminably it seemed, in a great space filled with the throbbing of hundreds of concentrated engines racing in low gear at irregular speeds over bumpy trackless desert, and it was a dazed and exhausted mass of humanity that tumbled out when we arrived at our destination.

Then came the slow and infuriating duties of night leaguer—stumbling over strange ground in the darkness to check the state of the squadron's tanks, replenishment of petrol and ammunition, collecting rations, and taking down orders into my note-book (which usually revealed on the morrow a meaningless set of hieroglyphics). The best thing was the hot stew, which was cooked by the cook-house during the day back at the transport echelon, and brought up in hay-boxes for the tank crews and forward replenishment vehicle crews. There was usually enough for each man comfortably to fill himself, and with the addition of the last mug of tea we went to bed happy, though burdened with the knowledge that dawn patrols would begin in three or four hours' time. The time of the last mug of tea, sipped with my crew round about me, settling down for the night after a day of peril and exhaustion, was the moment when our spirits swung free and we were in true contact with each other. When three ordinary men, who had sweltered blindly all day inside a tank, dependent on me alike for their safety and justification in battle, only from my voice guessing at the progress of the battle and our own particular position, could get out of the tank when we stopped at one or two o'clock in the morning, lay out my bed-roll and

say, "You get into bed, sir, and we'll bring you your tea"—it was the time for me to thank my stars for having shown me the heights of human nature.

Whatever crew I had I found it was the same, and if I think particularly of Ryder in this connection it is because he embodied all the virtues common to the saint and the soldier. He was in his late thirties, married, and had, I think, four children. In such circumstances it would have been easy for him to have jogged along in the regiment's transport echelon with the other married men who were getting on in years and had families to support, but no, he was in this war to fight, and had driven a tank in every campaign in which the regiment had taken part. He took great care of his tank and was proud to have it clean. If there was anything wrong with it, he worked on it all night with the fitters, even when they told him to go to sleep as he had been fighting all day and they had merely been riding about in lorries. He never complained about a change of orders and was always the first to jump up and start work after a period of rest. When the battle had worn out our fastidiousness and we were only too happy to eat and drink any old how, he would always be the one to spend five minutes cleaning the mugs and spoons. He always said he could produce a mug of tea more quickly than any other man in the squadron, and he certainly could produce it in a very short time. He did not simply obey orders; he took a load off my shoulders by anticipating them, particularly in battle, when he had an almost uncanny sense for choosing ground, and he never missed a gear when the next shell was going to land where we would have been if he had missed it. He was always careful not to change gear when I was sending a wireless message, for the noise inside when the gears were changed often made speech indistinct. At night, when the will to win in most of us was reduced to a dull patient endurance, he would force himself to be a hundred per cent soldier, and not admit the slipshod performance of a single duty. Often I saw him sitting on the ground, leaning against the tank, with his empty pipe in his mouth and his sanded yellow face half covered by a beret which was scorched

with holding hot cooking utensils and opening hot engine doors, snoring, and then leaping up in full possession of his senses when his name was called. There was room beside his efficiency and determination for a kindly humour and benevolent attitude towards all men, for he was liked by all and had the nickname of "Pop" among the men and officers. He was "Pop", a father to everyone who needed him. At night in leaguer, after days of fighting and glare and sand and nights broken by long noisy journeyings, when I was more dead than alive, his presence and cheerfulness were a comfort and inspiration quite new to me.

So the days went on. The regiment was used independently again in an attempt to ease the pressure on the Free French at Bir Hacheim, but as the orders were to do our utmost "without losing tanks" the adventure was not a success, and the Free French had to fight their way out on the night of 12th June. I have never seen such dive-bombing as the Free French had to endure. In spite of the large number of British fighter sorties over the place, the Germans found it easy to arrive in between them, as the nearest British airfield in use was at Gambut, a hundred miles away. Then in an area only two miles across enormous numbers of bombs were dropped, and the great curtain of dust and fumes they raised loomed over the neighbouring desert like a sandstorm. It was on our last evening by Bir Hacheim that, not more than half a mile across open desert from the spot where I had just been in action against enemy guns, our quartermaster-sergeant presented me with three letters and invited me to inspect his lorry with a view to taking from it any item of clothing I needed replaced. This was efficiency, if you like, for we were out in the blue, miles beyond our main forces, and any wandering enemy might have attacked the regiment's defenceless little supply column as it bumbled across the empty desert.

The next day, Bir Hacheim and the main infantry box in the Gazala mine-field having fallen, the Germans swept up again from the south, and once again the 90th Light Division had to contend with masses of British transport, including

one column belonging to our regiment. Jerry took our boys prisoner, but found them rather a handful. Freddie Coombes, the major commanding, having had his belongings searched (the German officer apologized for looking at the photograph of his wife), and having been interviewed at the German divisional headquarters, contrived to take off his crowns and slip among the men, telling them not to give him away. The Germans searched for but did not find him, for Freddie was on a lorry with fifteen soldiers, which was guarded by one large German. Squat little Freddie got into a good position and kicked him hard between the legs, knocking him out, and then drove off in the lorry. The Germans fired everything in hell at them, but they got away with only two out of the sixteen wounded.

Also, the battalion transport sergeant, Humphries, and his driver, Johnson, won glory. They were standing unarmed away from their truck, beside which were two Germans, one with a tommy-gun and one with a rifle. The Germans beckoned them over, and Humphries and Johnson went one on each side of the truck. Johnson leapt on the man with the rifle (which went off over his shoulder) and knocked him out. Humphries' opponent's tommy-gun jammed, but he was a larger German, and it was not until Johnson's arrival that he was overcome. They threw him in the back of the truck and Humphries drove away with Johnson sitting in the back and panning out the Jerry every time he woke up. During the night, when many of our fellows were still with the Germans, Jerry did a "flap" move and all the prisoners were able to lie on the ground when he rushed off without the time to spare to check the prisoners. So the regiment had a hearty laugh over the pale bespectacled squadron clerks who had been prisoners and had escaped from the frightful enemy.

During this second German advance from the south, our squadron was out on its own under Oscar, awaiting instructions from Division, and we jogged happily northward between two German columns, both of which we could see. That night the escarpment to the south of El Adem was

dotted with fires, for much British transport was destroyed. But even while we were watching them, we who were out of touch with our regiment and had seen the effect of the new enemy advance, we hoped and hoped, and next morning our hopes were justified, for Richard arrived and told me to navigate the squadron to a spot near Knightsbridge. On the way we passed El Adem aerodrome, whose satellite landing ground was still being used by a small number of planes, and whose 3.7 anti-aircraft guns were sending out great gouts of flame, giving us confidence because if anything had been seriously wrong, they of all things would not have been there.

There followed worse and more confused battles, in windier, dustier, hotter weather, in tanks whose mechanical soundness was daily decreasing. I remembered doing one patrol when my eyes were not working properly, under shell-fire for three hours out in front of the regiment in a tank which I dared not stop because the clutch was jammed, and I had to keep moving at a mile an hour on my point of observation. On that day the regiment was in a good hull-down position until evening, when we were ordered to withdraw, and the German tanks followed us up so closely that we had to turn and fight in the failing light on the top of an escarpment. The enemy had much the worst of the engagement, and we put our fingers to our noses at them and withdrew again in absolute comfort. Most of us were suffering from chronic exhaustion, and the memory of those days is a weird phantasmagoria in which the only reality was the divine bond between us all which forced feats of bravery and kindness from our worn-out spirits.

On and on and on went the endless clamour and weariness. One night we retreated through a mine-field, and in the morning I thought we had advanced again to the Gazala mine-field. Another time I was told to advance three miles in a thick sandstorm to a point which the enemy was known to occupy, and when I arrived there, after a journey that was an ordeal, I was fired at from a hundred yards' range by some of our own tanks from another brigade. In that glimmering

world of sand and shells and sun there always seemed to be people looking for other people, jogging about the desert in their vehicles with their eyes screwed up and their hair and faces dusted thickly with the burden of the atmosphere.

At last it appeared to us that some sort of general withdrawal was going on. We zigzagged one night through the Tobruk mine-fields, and next morning we were still going through them. At the sides of the rough tracks were wrecked vehicles, which explained the sinister explosions we had heard during the night, and all around were the troops who were being left to defend the place. We were glad to reach the last wrinkle of barbed wire, get out into formation, and strike south-eastwards towards Sidi Rezegh, where we were scattered that evening by a heavy attack. Darkness fell, and as we watched the line of Jerry Verrey lights advancing towards Gambut we realized that Tobruk was isolated once more. Well, we thought, what we had done once we could do again, and there was no harm in falling back to the friendly frontier positions we knew so well. We went far south of the Trigh-el-Abd to an area of large dispersed dumps, and there in the friendly south where we knew the Germans and Italians rarely went we rested for a few hours before going behind the Egyptian frontier.

Almost at once Richard told us that we were to be detached for independent work with a Jock column, and we left the regiment and motored to a point north-west of Bir-el-Gobi which the Jock column was using as a base for harassing the flanks and rear of the enemy. On the first morning, the 21st June, we began to move northwards at half-past three, and first bumped into a Jerry anti-tank screen at about half-past five. There was a very thick ground mist which clung to the low-lying parts of the desert, and in this mist Jerry played with us, firing a few shots at us and then running away, to reappear somewhere else. It was a strange mist, scudding about in chunks with the light wind, and I wondered how it was that I had never noticed such a mist before if it was a phenomenon of desert weather. Sometimes it seemed to be tinged with grey, and then it was almost as if

it were cloud which had somehow got down to ground level. Tobruk was twenty miles to the north-east, and the supposed object of our pushing northwards was to help any British stragglers who might have been trying to get away in our direction. In this northward push I was in contact with these fly-by-night anti-tank guns for six hours. During the first two hours I laughed at the whistle of solid shot, during the third and fourth I was tense and apprehensive, and during the last two I was very weary and uneasy. One never expects to see an enemy gun before it fires at one, but having to cope with drifting mist as well as folds in the ground was an additional strain which soon took effect on me.

It was on this morning, when he was on the other flank, that Geoffrey's voice came over the air to give his most famous message: "Hello, Rum, Rum calling—ah—having a spot of bother—ah." Then he switched off and we saw him tearing up the valley only twenty yards behind the Jerry vehicles. They outsped him, and he returned, furious at having failed to catch them. His "spot of bother" was a fifty-millimetre shell which went right through the top of his engine and shot away his air cleaners.

At midday we were withdrawn, and we all sat round our tanks or lay under them in any shade we could find, having a brew of tea at least once an hour. Then Richard came over to tell us that Tobruk had fallen. We really should have guessed before, because the strange "morning mist" was only the smoke from the burning dumps of the port, skulking away to the south in any depressions it could find. It was the unhappiest day of battle I ever had.

The repercussions on us of the fall of Tobruk were obvious and immediate. We had to travel as far as possible that night and get back to the frontier where, we imagined, the main forces had by now prepared a good position. The second moon of the battle was on the wax and still in its early stages, so we moved very fast until it set. I was shepherding the stragglers, and early next morning when I was towing a broken-down armoured car, and a petrol lorry was sent back to me, I took pleasure in cooking a really sumptuous break-

fast deep in enemy territory. We had chosen a southern route, so that during our leisurely meal we saw neither vehicle nor aeroplane, and were able to indulge in more comfort and peace than people miles behind us. I think mine was the last tank out of Libya.

When we arrived behind the frontier we went to a rendezvous where we handed over our tanks to a slightly less battle-scarred regiment, and then we set off for Mersa Matruh on our own, with just the old staff car, the mess, cook-house, and fitters' lorries, and one petrol lorry. We were five officers and about forty-five men, and we all had the one idea of eating and sleeping to repletion. The battle could go where it liked, for we had given away our tanks and now disclaimed all responsibility in the matter, and until we were given some more tanks at Mersa Matruh we were going to have a good time. We were so slow about moving back that we woke up one morning to find ourselves nearer to the enemy than the armoured brigade which was doing the southern flank rearguard for the Eighth Army. We got on the move pretty quickly that morning, and made good progress on our southerly route, which we had carefully planned to include the best wells.

We were very happy. We were all boys together again, reunited in a bright garden after a perilous journey over a bare plain through gaps in whose hideous mists we had caught glimpses of each other's pale strained faces as the horrors shrieked by. The mess corporal, Staker, who had grimly held on to his lorry in the battle all through the vicissitudes of shelling and machine-gunning and having it converted into a mere petrol lorry, came into his own again with his superb cooking, and presided like a comforting deity. One day, after a long chase with a herd of gazelle, Richard shot a fine young one through the head, and Staker was overjoyed, taking it into his lorry with the tender rapture of a godmother with a child at its christening. We thought we would have time to eat it at Mersa Matruh, but we arrived at Charing Cross, to the south of the port, to find the brigadier, who had conducted his rearguard in expectation of getting

behind a marvellous defence line here, very depressed at the state of unreadiness everywhere, and we were told to go on to Fouka. We left the brigade, whose staff had had no rest at all since the beginning of the battle, for when one regiment had been withdrawn to collect new tanks, they had been given another to fill the gap, and so were always directing a battle. At night, of course, they had more sleep than the fighting regiments. At Fouka we pitched the mess right by the sea, and prepared to enjoy ourselves until we were given new tanks. The gazelle, which was just about right for eating now, loomed large in our imaginations, but before we had all even had time to bathe, and were still busy collecting scattered remnants of the squadron, the order came to go back again, this time to a stretch of coast behind El Alamein, and we heaved sighs of relief because we knew we would go no farther.

Our morale at this time was very high. The fall of Tobruk had been a great shock, but since then we had known every action to be merely a delaying one. Therefore Mersa Matruh did not worry us. We knew that the British plan had been to withdraw so fast to Mersa Matruh that we would have time to reorganize before Jerry's arrival, and that Jerry had turned up at Charing Cross on the second day with a hundred and fifty tanks, thus causing us to make a further withdrawal under cover of a rearguard action by the New Zealand division. But El Alamein was different. We knew we were going to stop here. So with all the reverence and ceremony we could muster from our battle-scarred mess lorry, upon a white tablecloth spread on a table under a palm tree, ranged about with the glorious fresh vegetables and alcoholic refinements of civilization, after an afternoon of devotional cooking, we ate our gazelle. Later, still marvelling, I wrote a parody of a love-song by W. J. Turner, in which the author compares a girl favourably with a gazelle. In my parody, of course, the gazelle was the object of adoration.

Our short stay there was heaven. We slept on our camp beds between hummocks of sand and wiry grass, and only occasionally did enemy aircraft disturb our moonlit sleep, fly-

ing up and down the road machine-gunning. By day, of course, we had not seen an enemy plane for a very long time, for the R.A.F. so dominated the skies that the retreating army was able to travel with its vehicles nose to tail on the coast road. In the mornings we were awakened by the pure sparkling sun, and leapt out of bed to scamper fleetfoot and barefoot over the tussocky sand-hills for a quarter of a mile to the sea, where we plunged into the scintillating blue water and swam and laughed and shouted for joy. We bathed nearly all day, and in the intervals we wore clean clothes and ate wonderful food. The moon was full, and we bathed in the ecstatic quiet of the murmuring silver waters, forgetting the quickly approaching frenzy and savagery of battle in the irresponsibility and beauty of our dream island existence.

We were all given twenty-four hours' leave in Alexandria, and I was able to see my friends Edmond and Nina again. I found them on the beach at Sidi Bishr, spending a normal day, which must have taken some courage because Alexandria was almost prostrate beneath the imminent peril, and the fifth column was spreading delicious rumours. Three days later, when we had moved to Amriya to equip with new tanks, I had another twenty-four hours' leave. These swift visits to Alexandria were breaths of home to me, for I was made so welcome that the house in which my friends lived became the most cherished spot in my world. It was unthinkable that the Germans should reach Alexandria.

On both these occasions when I visited them I found them depressed and apprehensive, all except Edmond, who was always optimistic, but when Paddy and I crept into Alexandria in a staff car without lights on the last evening before the regiment went into the desert again, there were a dozen of our friends gathered together and they seemed really downcast. There had been a run on the banks headed by the British residents who had been given facilities to travel elsewhere, and the shops were profiting from the panic by doubling and trebling food prices. A friend had rung them up from Cairo and told them that the Germans were already in Alexandria.

VIII

SMELL NAPLES AND DIE

THE lighter was on the move, and the faint breeze caused by motion in the still air carried away the smell of my unfortunate neighbour, so that my last view of Tobruk was unspoilt by outside things. There lay the tortured town, at the sound of whose name people all over the world mused and thought of glory, strength and disaster, its white walls scattered on their hill of stubborn bitty rock, hardly changed since I first saw it in February, 1941, except for the sinister multiplication of masts and funnels protruding from the calm blue waters of its harbour. The lighter turned to the left and made its way to the rough jetty beside the beach hospital to pick up a few more wounded, and I saw a small rock bay where we had used to swim in the old days. Was it possible that so much had happened since then? I felt overburdened and yet sanctified by the thought of the enormous number of deaths which had consecrated the place as a memorial to the futility and heroism of human striving.

We left the jetty and soon reached the hospital ship, the *Gradisca*, a large converted passenger ship. Stretcher cases were slung aboard by a crane. I was put down beside the rail outside a large ward, and here the afternoon sun beat down at the already burnt surfaces of my body through the rails. The top rail was the thickest and threw the widest shadow, so in the length of this shadow, which ran along my stretcher, I tried to rest my body little by little. However, after a time two stewards came to carry me in and I soon found myself in a bed next to an Italian with a broken leg who seemed to think that the end of the world had come. He kept crying out "Sorella!" in a piteous voice, and until she came he would claw the curtains round his bed, gasping and crying on God to save him, but it seemed to me to be all my eye and Betty Martin, because when the sister, a very pretty blonde, arrived, he had sufficient composure and imagination both to paint her

a lurid picture of the purgatory he was in and to take every opportunity of holding her hand. A fine fellow.

We left Tobruk that night for Mersa Matruh, where the ship was to take on another group of wounded, who turned out to be mostly German. Just before we arrived there they suddenly discovered that I was an officer, and as I was in a troops' ward there was absolute Italian chaos for a few minutes, with doctors gesticulating and grimacing and sisters saying "Si, si, si, si, si" to everything that was said. "Si si si si si" is Italian for "Yes"; but not always content with that, they sometimes said the Italian for "Yes, yes". I was taken to a cabin the doorway of which was too narrow for a stretcher, so I was manhandled and put into bed. Italian orderlies, when handling an amputation case, in their eagerness to do the job properly always want to hold the end of the stump where the wound is, and as one is never handled by the same orderly twice it is impossible to educate the little fellows.

I shared this cabin with a gunner officer recently out from England called Blackah, who had one toe off and the one next to it fractured. He had a book which he had managed to borrow and was reading it at the time, but as he spent a lot of time on deck he let me read it when he was away. It was *How Green was My Valley*, and I raced through its enthralling pages in two days, thus leaving two days to be faced in complete idleness and solitude.

The food on board the *Gradisca* was like a pleasant dream after the terrible stuff I had had to force down my throat in the Italian hospital at Tobruk, and if I closed my eyes I could imagine myself in an Italian restaurant in London in peacetime, for there was everything except real coffee. I was kept in a state of constant delight and anticipation concerning the next meal, for we never seemed to have the same thing twice. There were real minestrone soup with cheese gratings, chicken, fresh meat, ravioli, eggs and always warm crisp rolls straight from the baking-oven. Twice, too, I had fresh butter.

The first day I was in the cabin, a grey-haired sister looked in and began talking in Italian, stopping when she saw us looking quite blankly at her. There was a short embarrassed

silence, expectant on our side and puzzled on hers. Then making an effort to smile, she said, "Tedeschi?" (Germans?) and we shook our heads. She broke into a broad smile and said, "Well, I suppose you aren't English, are you?" and we all began rocking with laughter. It appeared that she had English friends in Italy, and had even spent some time in England years ago. I used this new acquaintance to get some belladonna to help me to sleep, for my lost leg, after playing with me in the daytime, pretending it was doing all sorts of antics, settled down at dusk to giving me severe jolts and shocks, as if asking me to take it back into the fold. She let me have the belladonna every night for the rest of the voyage, although apparently it was against the rules or they had only a small supply of it, for she told me not to let the doctor know she had given it me.

In spite of the belladonna I only slept until the early hours of the morning, and then settled down to the frantic and dining restlessness and pain which were a prelude to the dawn. The engine throbbed in steady pulses which seemed to press flat weights on my head, and in the sticky summer heat of the Mediterranean runnels and rivulets of sweat trickled over my body and tickled me in unexpected places. My bed sore was about at its worst now, although it was never very bad as bedsores go, and when I heaved myself laboriously sideways with my arms to get my body out of a wet patch of sheet its surface was scraped by the folds of the bedclothes, for of course I could not yet lift my body clear of the bed. I lay there until the first light settled gently on Blackah's dark head, and then I used to watch him sleeping and try to follow the course of his dreams as he moved and swallowed and twitched his eyebrows in the meanderings of his subconscious world. Sometimes he turned right over and settled the bedclothes neatly and efficiently in some new position, holding his breath while he did so and letting out a sigh of relief when he became settled again, so that often I whispered to him in the certain belief that he was awake. Thank heaven he did not snore!

At about half-past seven the steward came in with the coffee

and roll and jam, but Blackah went on sleeping, or if he did by any chance open one eye on the unfriendly prospect of another day as a prisoner, he was able to slide back into oblivion with an enviable ease, as if he were a constant devotee of poppy or mandragora. How I envied him his gift of sleep! I had slept well all my life, and was unprepared by any experience for those long, long early morning hours when I felt completely forsaken and alone with my pain and my fears. Sometimes I would lose consciousness and awake with a glad hope that I had slept for an hour or two, a hope that died an infinitely long-drawn-out death as time passed by, punctuated by the distant and fretful night sounds of hospitals; feet hurrying past laboriously trying to keep silent, the swish of skirts and sudden beam of light as the night sister passed, occasional cries, usually one steady cough somewhere, the dripping of the drinking-water tap in the passage, where patients went all night for water, and the steady amber glow of the night light in the passage which seemed as dark as doom if I wanted light and like an all-pervading sun if I wished to rest my eyes in darkness. If I turned my face to the wall for long my neck became stiff, for I had to lie on my back all the time, and even with my face turned away like that I met the glow of the reflected light from the white wall of the cabin. Before we finally settled down at night I always got Blackah to draw the green semi-transparent curtain across the doorway, but either there would be a chink of light left at both sides or else a doctor doing his night round early and wishing to get to bed would not replace it properly after looking in.

The cabin was L-shaped, with the port-hole at one end throwing its light on to Blackah's bed by day, and the door at the other end throwing its light on to my bed by night, so that I was in gloom in the daytime and host to unwelcome lights at night.

The steward was rather a decent little chap who had been in the merchant service nearly all his life. His hair was dark, his face pale, and his eyes, which were always wide open, gave him a permanently surprised look. He walked and moved

and talked in a series of jerks, like a marionette. He had a smattering of many languages, like most seafaring men, and would stand there gesticulating and moving his lips quickly while he counted from one to twenty, first in Urdu and then in Arabic, to show the similarity between the two languages. He was very good at bringing me clean towels to put underneath my stump, which was discharging with great gusto now that I was getting stronger, and making a mess in the bed very soon after being dressed. One day when I showed him my long hair matted with sand and sweat, he offered to get some water and wash it. My first joy at this suggestion was followed by disappointment at the way he set about it, for he made a very poor attempt to disencumber my scalp of its thick stratum of filth, although I suppose little short of three Turkish baths would have been of any real use.

There was a German interpreter from Afrika Korps headquarters who came to see me from time to time. He was an Austrian, and very much regretted that his knowledge of English had caused him to be separated from all his friends, who were in Alpine regiments fighting on the Russian front. In the first German advance he was in the small detachment of troops that Rommel sent up to Mechili, saying to them, "Off you go. Meet me in Derna in nine days' time." When they arrived at Mechili they found a large group of British vehicles, and spent the day or two until larger German forces arrived popping up from all angles with their machine-guns, wondering why this huge mass of enemy (who incidentally were only transport and other field services) did nothing in retaliation. This reminded me of my own doings at that disorderly time in the history of the desert army. The night Mechili was busy falling I was sitting beside a solitary tank at Tmimi, where a track from Mechili ran past Tmimi aerodrome to join the coast road, waiting for an Australian brigade to which I was to report. I had been told to wait at the crossroads for them, and to watch the track coming from Mechili for either German light reconnaissance forces or some of our own people who might have escaped from Mechili. Day came, and as our thoughts turned to breakfast, I made

sure that one of us was sitting the whole time on the top of the tank with binoculars glued on the spot where the Mechili track first appeared between two mounds beyond the aerodrome. After a while a British officer of an Indian cavalry regiment turned up in a ramshackle vehicle looking for his company whose rations he had with him. I told him he had better stay with us until he could get some reliable information about his regiment, because it was unsafe for him to go towards Mechili, and he seemed delighted, offering us as much food as we could carry. About this time we noticed the smell of brandy. While my sergeant, a gay rascal who could make fun and nonsense out of any situation, was happily frying sausages and bacon in the bottom of a petrol tin, the officer and I looked round for something to do, and saw to our delight a large domestic duck, more English-looking than the Union Jack, sitting on the desert about thirty yards away. "Bet you a pound I can hit it with my revolver!" cried my friend, hauling out a big .45. "Done!" said I, and almost before the word was out of my mouth the first bullet had gone. The duck, disturbed in her morning prinkings and drinkings of the dew, decided in face of this threat that the way to safety lay as usual towards the nearest human beings, and left the ground, with the greatest difficulty causing her enormous body to become airborne. She flew towards us in a quiet and methodical progress of about four miles an hour, flapping her wings up and down as if it were the first time of ascent, while every second or two the hunter pulled the trigger. The last bullet of his six-round chamber left the gun when the courageous duck was only four yards away, and in desperation he tried to hit it with the weapon itself as it bore on its adamantine course within reach of his arm. We all collapsed with laughter, and I never saw my pound. While we were eating breakfast we had been watching four dust-clouds moving down the track towards us at a great distance, and when they left the track and fanned out, continuing their course towards us, we knew that it was time to put away the breakfast things. We were just starting the engine when two Australian trucks about a mile to our left

rushed out to meet the dust-clouds, and almost at once we heard the crackle of small-arms fire. We moved off as quickly as possible, as we knew what would be the outcome of a battle between four German machine-guns and a few Australian rifles, but unfortunately our machine-gun jammed and we had to fire solid shot at the German cars, which made off at top speed at the sight of my tank, leaving behind one car with a crew of three. We took back the three Germans, one of whom was about to die, and handed them over to a passing ambulance before going back to fetch the German car. When we arrived with it and shared out the spoils the intrepid hunter overwhelmed us with slightly tipsy congratulations, and offered to go to a nearby dump and fetch us a reserve of ammunition. The Australian brigade had arrived by then, and I was sent out to investigate a wild report that there were fifteen German tanks on Tmimi aerodrome. When we returned we found the hunter sitting dead drunk in his car, which had sideslipped into the ditch. We put the car on the road, poured away the rest of his brandy, and covered him with a coat to protect his poor face from the hot sun and flaying wind, for had he not provided us with a regal breakfast, a good laugh and some extra ammunition?

The German interpreter and I went on to discuss the summer battle just concluded, and he rubbed bitter salt into my grief over our defeat by saying that on the fifth day of the battle the Afrika Korps was surrounded, short of petrol, ammunition and water, and its morale at a very low ebb because no one, not even the headquarters, could get away from the persistent and accurate shelling of the British artillery. He said the battle would have been ours if we had attacked. I replied that he was only telling me what everyone in the British Army, from regimental sanitary orderlies to colonels, knew at the time. I asked him what he was going to do after the war, and he said that Germany would need many political officers to look after the occupied countries, and he thought that with his linguistic qualifications he would get a good position. Apparently he was at present only paid as a private after having been in Africa as an inter-

preter since the Germans arrived there. A propos of his plans for when the war was over, I said, "So you're going to conquer Russia then?" His reply surprised me by its sheer illogicality. "No, but we will defeat them so severely that they will never again be able to launch a successful offensive against us. They will never capitulate to us or ask for peace terms, but we will be able to keep them back by means of a new fortified frontier from the Caucasus through Moscow to Leningrad. Then when we have beaten you we will be able to organize the whole of Europe for a tremendous fresh onslaught against Russia." If this was the typical German view at the end of July 1942, what must it be now?

Inevitably we came to discuss the attitude of our respective armed forces to the Red Cross. We agreed that both Germans and British respected it on the battlefield, for examples of trust and courtesy where enemy wounded were concerned were too numerous for there to be any doubt about it, but when it came to the respective air forces we disagreed. We put the bombing of towns with the resultant hitting of hospitals and churches on one side and concentrated on clear-cut examples of violating the Red Cross. He told me that one night in Barce (the location, incidentally, of Rommel's headquarters at the time) the R.A.F. came over, illuminated the tented hospital there, and bombed it until every tent collapsed or was on fire. I pointed out that even with the help of flares red crosses on tents cannot be seen at night, but he was unconvinced. He made no reply when I told him that I had seen seven Stukas attack a British hospital ship in Tobruk harbour when the ship was at least half a mile from all other shipping, and the conversation drifted back to the treatment of enemy wounded on the battlefield by both sides. I told him that I owed my life to the men of the 155th Lorried Infantry Regiment, and this he took as a matter of course, shrugging his shoulders and saying, "But your soldiers would do the same for one of our men," to which I replied that I hoped so. He said that of course nothing like that ever happened on the Russian front, and although the percentage casualties in the desert were far higher than in

Russia, German soldiers always preferred to go to Africa because there it was war as they understood it, with brave men on both sides and a leavening of sport and chivalry.

The only people he objected to on the Allied side were the Australians, whom he accused of not fighting fairly, and when I asked him to give me an example of the Australians using unfair methods, this was the account he gave of them: When the Germans were opposite the Australians on the coast at Sollum, the Australians used to send out patrols armed with knives on the ends of long sticks, which they used to cut off the heads of German sentries when they had crept silently behind them! The good old German mentality which thinks a thing is unfair when it is used against them, but clever and justifiable if they use it against others! I laughed with delight and pointed out that the Australian method followed two of the best principles of modern warfare, concealment and surprise, and said that it was not the practice these days to shout, "Hey, watch out!" before firing at the enemy. I discovered that it was impossible to argue with him, for whenever we disagreed he quietly changed the subject in a well-bred manner, leaving in the air the intimation that his views were quite unassailable and that if I thought differently I was only to be pitied for not being one of the enlightened. I was up against this characteristic every time I had a conversation with a German during my captivity.

I do not know why he was on the hospital ship, as there appeared to be nothing wrong with him in spite of his statement that he had malaria, and I put him in the same category as all the other Germans who were walking about in high spirits and thoroughly enjoying the voyage. I cannot say for certain that they were going back to Germany on ordinary leave, because obviously they would conceal such a thing from me if it were true.

If the interpreter was trying to get information from me he made a poor attempt, as he did nearly all the talking, and never even asked me a question, while he allowed me to pump him systematically, especially about Russia.

Amongst the large number of patients who came to fill their water-bottles and cups from the cold-water tap just outside my cabin was a huge blond German, young and perfectly built, but with a look of childish melancholy on his face, and he used to look in at me while he was waiting for his turn at the tap. One day, with neither of us knowing a word of the other's language, the following conversation took place:

HE: Tommy?

I: Yes.

HE: Are you panzer?

I: Yes.

HE: Where were you wounded?

I: El Alamein. Your fifty-millimetre anti-tank gun.

HE: Ah, five centimetres. Very good gun. Much pain?

I: So-so. What's the matter with you? Are you wounded?

HE: Malaria. War is a very bad thing, isn't it? Why do we have wars?

I: Are you finished with Africa and going home?

HE: No, only three or four weeks, then back again. It is terrible.

The Italian medical colonel who was in charge of the ship was a funny old bird with a curved and twisted beak under his rimless glasses. He walked about like a rook, squawking hoarsely and moving his brown and bony fingers nervously like a sitting rook resettling its wing feathers. His method of discovering whether or not a wound needed dressing was to bend over the bed, sticking his wings out behind him so as not to lose his balance, and put his beak right down on to the dirty bandage. Then he inhaled deeply, and according to the strength of the smell, he croaked out, "Oggi!" (to-day) or shrugged and said happily, "Domani" (to-morrow).

I only had my wounds dressed once during my four and a half days on the *Gradisca*, because after the first dressing I was very careful to answer all enquiries about them with the assurance that they were comfortable and clean. The surgery seemed to me to be the most up-to-date and spotless thing I

had ever seen, especially with the good effect on me of the sight of grey-haired doctors and the kind sister who brought me belladonna at night, but I was horrified at the busy way they set about me. It was more like washing-day in a mad-house than dressing-time in a hospital. They scrubbed away at my wounds, and every time I lifted my head to see what was going on they pushed me back into the lying position. However, their persistence was not as great as mine, so that eventually I was allowed to watch the operations unhindered. They poured something like iodine into all my wounds as though I had not been receiving hygienic treatment before I came to them, with the result that I was in considerable pain for the rest of the day—not with the jars and shocks of nerves and clammy stinging when dressings move across sensitive places to which I had become accustomed, but a deep and persistent burning sensation in the centre of all my wounds. I was naked while I was being dressed and very conscious of the filthy state of my body. I was not shy of its nakedness, but I did not want anyone to think that I was unnecessarily dirty, especially the young blonde sister I have mentioned before, who was fetching and carrying for the doctors and the senior sister. Seeing my shame, she came up smiling and put her hand on my shoulder for a moment in an impulsive gesture.

One or two British officers had come to see me and relieve my loneliness, but I was happy when Blackah announced that we were going through the Strait of Messina, for it meant that we had nearly ended this uneventful sea journey. It had been a flat calm the whole time.

The day passed in happy anticipation of our arrival at Naples. We were still some way from the shore when a curious smell became evident in the cabin. At first we thought that it might be something burning, then it seemed as if some waste fumes had escaped, or perhaps our cabin was above the hole out of which went the ship's sewage. Blackah had not said that the ship was in the harbour, so that the natural explanation did not come to my mind at once. He only talked about being in the Bay of Naples, and said that he

could see the harbour and town. At last the truth dawned on me, and I began to laugh and say I knew what the smell was. I told Blackah it was Naples, the filthiest town in Europe, but he did not believe that a stench could travel so far over the sea and still smell as strongly as that. It was only as we drew nearer that the fact became obvious even to his clean mind. Worse than Suez, more penetrating by far than the mild effluvium that floats across the water to the traveller at Port Said, the smell of the distant approaches of their much vaunted Naples had more power to arouse in our minds feelings of disgust and derision for our enemies than all their battle-field cowardice and treachery and lack of sanitation in the field.

IX

CELEBRITIES, SIGHTS AND VIEWS

As soon as the ship was tied up at the wharf an unholy clamour started on board. It appeared that a princess, a cardinal and a general were coming to visit the wounded heroes, and of course everything had to be neat and clean. There was great excitement amongst the British prisoners about this novel experience of seeing royalty when we were in such a destitute and low state, and in any case we approved of the sentiment behind the visit of notabilities to an ordinary hospital ship back from the front. I thought what a deep pleasure it would be to arrive in a British hospital ship at Southampton and exchange a few words with the Duchess of Kent, the Bishop of Winchester and General Martel. Can anything be more satisfying to a man who has been wounded fighting for his country than the personal appreciation of people of national importance? Consider the miserable security-ridden arrival of the average British hospital ship at the average British port.

The illustrious party swept by in a flurry of sky-blue parasols and skirts, multi-coloured uniforms with unnumbered rows of medals on them and sweet feminine smiles and voices, leaving on every bed a bag of excellent sweets and a little religious picture, and when they had gone a gentle perfume was left floating in the eddying air. A schoolgirl of about thirteen who was a member of the party stayed behind for a minute or two talking with us in quite good English, and from her we tried to find out where we were going. All she could tell us was that we would be in a separate hospital from the Italian wounded.

So ended my four and a half days on board the *Gradisca*, where we had been treated exactly the same as the Italian and German wounded; for example, officers who were able to walk went wherever enemy patients were allowed to go, and had their food in quite a pleasant mess-room.

As I was put on the stretcher to be carried off the ship, the blonde sister stayed a moment to shake my hand and give me a smile, thus incurring the displeasure of the old colonel bird, who was squawking some command at her and flapping his wings about twenty yards up the passage. Out in the glaring sunlight again after four days of gloom and semi-darkness, I craned my neck and used my dazzled eyes to look for Vesuvius. Ah, there it was, high and indistinct, grey-tipped and rising from a dark foreground into a blue sky filigreed with wisps of vapour! Only a glimpse, and I was tilted and jerked down the gangway at a bewildering angle over the black and refuse-laden water beneath, to be laid down in the sun beside a row of ambulances on the quayside. I was in Italy.

Before the war a visit to Italy had seemed as remote from me as anything, but now that it was forced on me I could not even raise a spark of enthusiasm about landing in the spiritual home of Renaissance Europe. My brother's lively description of his short tour through Italy had put me off a country where such melancholy living conditions prevailed, and my contacts with Italians in the desert, both as captor and captive, had sealed my determination not to have anything to do with this pathetic race after the war.

Landing in Italy was only a milestone in my life, indistinguishable from the others. It had no significance like the moment when, after weeks of watching the grandeur of an ocean convoy with its slowly moving masts like great inverted pendulums swinging against the varying skies, I beheld one evening the towering, fiery cliffs on both sides of the Gulf of Suez. It brought no sense of achievement like the moment when, some day in December, 1941, we reached the top of the El Adem escarpment from the south, and looking down on the plain to the north-west, saw the myriad plumes of dust thrown up by the retreating vehicles of the German army, and knew, with a glorious uprush in the heart, that Tobruk was relieved. Only, it seemed pleasant that I should see once again a green tree that was not too tropical in origin, and be removed utterly from the scene of war. No more desert, I thought, no more flies, no more unsettling bangs.

I would have a bath the moment I arrived at the hospital, I thought, yes I would. I would lie in a comfortable bed beside a wide-open window and watch the sun edge round a paradise of trees and flowers. I would have English doctors who would know how to treat my wounds, and Italian sisters to feed my desire to be pampered and petted. I would have quite good food, too, I thought, and good heavens! I would soon get better. At Tobruk Gunn had told me that a compound fracture of the tibia takes about three months to mend, and I had been wounded four weeks ago now. Why, only two more months in bed! I was almost cured. And then by the time I was better there would be another exchange of prisoners, and I would be sent home, perhaps by Easter of next year!

Off we went in a small new ambulance through the town, of whose buildings I could see only a slanting cross-section through the small wired window just above my head, and soon we were going along an avenue of trees green in their summer effulgence. Ah, this was my Elysium taking shape at last! Soon the ambulance stopped and the doors were thrown open, to reveal a pleasant asphalted courtyard with trees and flowers all round, so that still it seemed to me that I was coming to a congenial haven.

Two grunting and sweating Italians carried me up four flights of stone stairs and then along a sunny corridor into the officers' amputation ward, where I was put into a bed in a corner. The window was small, throwing only a little light on the dull walls and closely packed beds. All the patients were very weak, none being able to get out of bed, so that if anyone wanted anything a bell had to be rung. This produced, usually after an interval of a few minutes, a harassed and pale British orderly, one of two who were overworked to a degree one would have thought impossible. They were not R.A.M.C. personnel, but ordinary soldiers who had come into the hospital as wounded and had volunteered to stay and work as medical orderlies. One of them told me he had not been outside the building for four months, and this fact, together with the hours of work and tours of night duty they per-

formed, appalled me. Yet here they were, willing to be at the beck and call of wounded men, ready at all times to help in any way to make their lives easier to bear, having condemned themselves to live in the physical and mental gloom of an ill-equipped and overcrowded hospital. Men like those ruin their health and sacrifice their happiness for a love and an idea, while elsewhere people regard it as clever to shirk responsibility and hardship, so that contemplation of the future of human development, with its alarming potency to destroy good and justify evil, makes one vomit in one's spirit.

Most of the wards had bugs in the beds in spite of the great efforts of the small British staff to outwit them, although fortunately ours was one of the few wards without them. The flies were persistent and numerous from dawn to dusk, for were we not near Naples, the filthiest city in Europe? I do not need to paint again the tantalizing and mesmeric effect of a profusion of flies in a room full of badly wounded men, most of whom were in constant pain. The food was bad, and after it had been carried up four stories on trays, nearly always cold. From the window I could see a red roof fifteen yards away and a small patch of blue sky, while the sun only shone into the room for a short time every morning and then nowhere near my bed. Never had I come into a place so utterly gloomy, so totally devoid of attraction or compensating adventure. At Tobruk I had felt an electricity in the air, born of desert conditions, the relative proximity of the battle-field, and the need for common effort in the battle against adversity, but here, remote from the war and becalmed in an alien backwater, it was hopelessly deadening to be surrounded by the vile and insidious adjuncts of a suffering that no longer seemed worth while. I revere and marvel at the wonderful power of the human spirit that filled the spaces between those dark walls with humour and the sympathy and loving-kindness which are brought by understanding. There is no void of misery and suffering too large to be filled by a spontaneous overflow of good from the human spirit.

This was the place to which I had come after beguiling my

three and a half weeks sojourn in Africa with extravagant thoughts of a well-equipped hospital in congenial surroundings, daydreams which I had taken care did not exceed possibilities. Now, disappointed and a little downcast at the outwardly wretched state of affairs, I looked about for compensations, and soon found them. First of all the senior British medical officer was a surgeon whose skill had won him the confidence of all the prisoners, and whose devotion to his work allowed nothing to stand in his way. Concerning him there was a report that just after he was captured, when he was left in a field hospital overflowing with wounded, he had worked for seventy-two hours without stopping, saving lives and senses and limbs the whole time. It seemed reasonable to me that under him my wounds would do very well, and that when my stump was re-amputated, as everybody said it would have to be, the operation would be a success. After all, I reflected, and the thought cheered me immensely, there was only one thing that was absolutely necessary for my cure, and that was a good doctor. My state of general health was remarkable considering that I had almost died less than a month before. I already had colour in my cheeks, and was sitting up to eat propped up with pillows, while fellows with just a single amputation who had been wounded before I was were not nearly as active, some of them even eating in a lying position. I was still getting a certain amount of pain in my stump, but the nerves were beginning to atrophy, as my lost foot now felt that it was a little nearer to me, that is to say about level with my left ankle. I also had an unpleasant plaster sore under my knee, and here for the first time something was done about it. There seemed no doubt that I would get better in a very short time.

The Italian commandant of the hospital was an inefficient and dignified old dear known to us as "Buon giorno" because of his daily greeting, which he iterated with an amusing pomp and stolidity every morning on his rounds. It came out with such a finality that when one replied "Buon giorno" politely the words did not make an adequate answer. His "Buon giorno" implied that it jolly well better be a "good day", and

also "I'm the man here". He had a son, also a doctor, who had been taken prisoner in Libya.

One day we heard that there was to be some sort of entertainment for the Italian wounded in another part of the hospital, and wondered if we would be able to hear it from our fourth-floor eyrie, for any music would have been a novelty and a joy. A group of singers and musicians it was, who had come from Naples to give a concert of music, mostly Italian. We listened to the usual opening selection of patriotic songs, including "Lili Marlene", which was sung fortissimo throughout by everyone there, and I was then surprised to hear one or two excellent voices singing solos and duets from various Italian operas. The last item on the programme before the final unison song was the magnificent quartet from *Rigoletto*. At once I was carried back with the associations it brought of Sadler's Wells, where *Rigoletto* was the last opera I had heard, and of the flat in London where I had used to hear it often on a radiogram. It was sung beautifully. I think if it had been played with two tin whistles and two mouth-organs it would have given me the day or two of happy memories I then enjoyed, and a new memory for later on. Four floors down, and no sight, only lovely sounds, punctuated by the coughings and talking and stirring of the beds around me.

We had plenty of books, as this had been the first Prisoners of War hospital opened in Italy, so that during the six days I was there I was able to read five books, all of them good. They were brought to the bed-patients by an officer with one leg who combined a great knowledge of books with an extraordinary ability to carry large numbers of them whilst walking with crutches. He also carried round the fruit which daily arrived for sale to the prisoners. He could walk on his crutches alone without using his leg, he could run almost as fast as a complete man by hopping and using his crutches, and it was no effort for him to walk using only one crutch—all this despite the fact that he had only been wounded seven months before.

I had imagined that this hospital was to be my final resting-

place in Italy, but after I had been there a day or two the news came through that a large number of us were leaving and that I was on the list. It is a proof of the extraordinary adaptability of human beings that I was very annoyed about this at first, for it shows that I had already become used to this depressing and dirty building with its brave and suffering inmates. Least of all did I want to go away from the good surgeon. Rumour had it that we were going to a new hospital that was only just beginning to take prisoners, and old inmates regaled us with lugubrious tales of conditions in a Prisoners of War hospital without Red Cross food parcels, books and clothes, so that we were a little apprehensive about the whole thing. However, the seed of hope takes root in any soil, and I began to pick up the fragments of my shattered dream of the ideal hospital for prisoners, forgetting the overpowering desire I had had on my arrival in Italy for rest and permanence above all things. By the time we left I was agog with enthusiasm and anticipation, even looking forward to the long train journey with its promise of fleeting glimpses of Italy.

I did not have a wash at that place apart from my hands and face. It was the first thing I had asked for on my arrival, but the difficulty of getting a rubber sheet, soap and hot water, and an orderly with time to spare from the hectic business of dealing with the large influx of new cases, discouraged me completely. I did not mind about it when I knew I was going to another hospital, and The Wash disappeared from my mind as a necessary function to be performed at the earliest possible moment and faded until it became part of the dream of the Ideal Hospital.

We were taken to the hospital train and loaded on it by midday, although it was not due to leave until ten o'clock that night, so that we had ten hours of sweltering heat in that airless metal train. Towards evening the train was shunted backwards and forwards a mile or two a few times, bringing into my view several characteristically European things of which I had been starved for two years. Once we stopped opposite what looked like a large military academy standing

in beautiful gardens, where men in gorgeous uniforms were walking up and down in the twilight with gaily dressed girls, and all were on their best behaviour. Laughing voices of people leading normal lives and the colours of flowers growing as usual came to us in our unnatural prison, bringing into our minds memories of the things we had forgotten in our grim struggle among the bare necessities of existence; love, beauty, all spiritual largess, and human ambition, for these people we saw had only the barest contact with the problem of keeping alive and were concerned with the physical and spiritual luxuries of that wonderful thing called human life. They were planning their lives, perhaps years ahead, they were in the glorious state of ignorance which is the immemorial armour of inexperienced youth on the threshold of life, while we were finished and burdened with the knowledge they sought to gain. Did they ever think, as they looked at this trainload of forlorn and bandaged prisoners of war, that they might be drawn by their very keenness on their present work into a parallel situation? No, youthful ambition has no conception of failure, which is the reason it gets so far. Did they ever think that we had once been in the same wonderful position as they were then, with their qualifications behind them and the world at their feet with its vast invitation? They may have done, but if so they added a mental reservation, sincere and unshakable, that this sort of thing could not possibly happen to them. As I looked at them, I felt pity and envy together, pity because they had no idea of the disillusion which awaited them, and envy because of the freedom and spaciousness they characterized. Although I have never been affected by envy of people who have two legs and normal mobility, I was always deeply affected by confinement, and envied outside people their right to make their own decisions and have access to the things and places interesting to them.

Our compartment was not crowded, and I got the Italian orderlies to pack together the two beds below me so that I could sit up to eat and see the country we passed through without having to put up with the claustrophobia imposed by

the normal clearance between equally spaced three-tiered beds in hospital trains. On every hospital train I have travelled in I have managed to get into a bed with only one above or below, and with what feelings of thankfulness and relief, for I have watched with discomfort stretcher cases trying to eat their food or drink their soup while a train is moving, awkwardly craning their necks, hitting their heads on the iron structure of the bed above, and getting cramp in their elbows by continually leaning on them.

The food was adequate, as I always found it on Italian hospital trains. A large bowl of rice or macaroni soup with a piece of meat was served twice a day, and the bread was of quite good quality and usually fresh, at least for the first day of the journey. There was also a daily wine issue. It sounds meagre and unvarying, but it sufficed, and I for one was always happy when meal-times came round, even to the point of licking my lips and saying in my mind, "Yum-yum!"

The orderlies and guards on this train were an inoffensive crowd, anxious to please us and talk with us. They liked us, and had no compunction about discussing their abhorred allies, the Germans, with us. They said the Germans were rude and callous, besides leaving messes all over the place which they (the Italians) had to clear up, and that when the war was over they would soon tell who owned Italy. They could treat us as friends and equals, for England had always been the friend of Italy, and had we not been allies in the last war? We would soon be allies again. It appears that the Germans on their entry into Italy made the initial mistake of treating Italians like dogs without first discovering whether they were dogs, and naturally the Italians resented it. The same mistake was made by many British soldiers on being handed over to the Italians by the Germans, particularly senior officers, and with unpleasant results, for no captor will let his captive treat him like a dog.

There was one medical orderly who said he had been captured by the Australians in 1940 and repatriated after a short stay in South Africa. He showed me a wide-opened mouth with many patched-up stoppings in his teeth, and said

that they had been all gold stoppings before the men who had captured him had taken away the gold. Every Italian to whom I spoke on the subject of the war showed a lively hatred for the Australians, born, of course, of fear.

It was always possible to find out what Italians thought about any subject without committing oneself to an opinion or attitude, for they were so keen to talk with one that all they demanded in return was personal sympathy. Sometimes even this personal sympathy was lacking, and their eagerness to have a chat was so great that they mistook a blank face, out of which came an occasional short laugh or non-committal remark, for a sympathetic one.

One of the guards was a stocky young peasant with the loudest voice and laugh I have ever heard, and a face whose expressions I could control by the different types of remarks I made. Outraged pride in his manhood shook him when I commented on his youth and immaturity, sentiment and pride when I questioned him about his family (followed inevitably by the production of a series of grubby photographs, at which I had to exclaim in wonder and admiration about the beauty of the wife, the size and health of the young child and its striking resemblance to the father, and the picturesque snugness of the house behind), doubt mingled with self-satisfaction when I told him how well built he was, and childish humour when I ragged him about his appalling voice. It was during the evening that I was talking to him and the group of miscellaneous Italians, and I amused myself building him up to a pitch of excitement and laughter until one of his deafening guffaws rent the air, and then quietening him by pointing to the sleeping prisoners and watching the expression of dismay and concern spread over his face. His companions joined in the fun, and we kept him in a state of alternate suspense and relief until it really was time to be quiet and go to sleep.

During the first night we passed through the outskirts of Rome, where somebody threw half a brick at the train, shattering the window over the bed of an officer with a leg off. Fortunately the curtains were drawn at the time, and

he was not cut at all by the flying glass or hit by the missile, although he had to spend half the night with an Italian orderly freeing his bed of fragments. After a while the Italian orderly officer arrived in a flurry of loud complaining words which woke half the people in the compartment. He wanted to know why he had not been informed at once, and upbraided the orderly for negligence of duty, as if something could have been done about catching the thrower of the half-brick.

We spent the whole of the next day looking out of the windows at varying and gorgeous scenery, first of all as we threaded our way in a series of tunnels and viaducts along an intricate coast of quaint bays and headlands beside a mirror-like Mediterranean, and then later as we followed river courses through the mountains towards the plain of Lombardy. We passed through Pisa, and those of us who were lucky enough to be more or less conscious (as there were no books on the train there was little to do except sleep) saw the leaning tower. We made a mental note to thank Providence at the next reckoning for having brought this war on the world and so enabled us to see the famous building. Providence had obviously intended that we should also benefit from the war by being granted a sight of Rome and Milan, but the Italians neatly forestalled this benefaction by taking the train through both those famous cities at night. The mountain scenery was a tonic to me, but I found that there, as everywhere in Italy, I was amazed and oppressed by the evidence of the fervid labouring which had reclaimed every possible spot for cultivation. In and out between giant rocks ran the crops and plants, and the steepest hillsides were terraced relentlessly into producing something to eat. I had only to look at these crazy hillsides to imagine the back-breaking industry and stolidity of the people who worked on them. I will always fight shy of people who live in an intensively cultivated country, for there is something terrifying about their perseverance in the face of the futility of a life of unending labour.

We stopped for several hours that night at some big town,

and arrived at our destination early on a damp cool day. Antediluvian ambulances whose stretchers rose and fell towards each other like hands trying to clap bumped us towards the hospital, which was only a mile or two from the station. We went about two hundred yards after passing a challenge at a gate, which gave the illusion of going through spacious grounds, and we stopped.

X

THE LONG REST BEGINS

THE ambulance doors were opened, showing us the same type of inviting courtyard shaded by graceful trees of a restful green as at the first hospital. Ridiculous and querying, hopes concerning the Ideal Hospital peered out through all my senses, for I knew that this time there would be no merciful transfer to another place, and that if it should prove gloomy and badly run, I would just have to put up with it. Two Italians in clean white overalls seized my stretcher, walked quickly to the foot of a staircase leading from a wide hall, and ran upstairs with me, keeping in step, the leading man holding the stretcher at his waist and the other by his head so that I was level the whole time. It was just one rapid glide to the doors of the ward, and although I was just a little worried that one of them might lose his footing as their boot-nails scraped on the stone stairs, I interpreted the thing aright. "Ha! Efficiency!" I was carried into the ward, and put in a bed next to another bed-patient.

I saw a tiny brown-eyed nun in white with a black bonnet, whose little mouse-like face was alive to help as she rushed about making people comfortable and getting them things. I was given a long clean white shirt, and was offered long white pants as well, which I did not take as they would only get in the way. I asked if I might have a wash before I put on my clean shirt, and was given a bowl of water, a towel and a rubber sheet. I was soon clean for the first time in five weeks, except for my hair, which was still matted with sand. The sheets were smooth and the bed well-sprung and comfortable without a rift valley down the middle of it. I was home at last. I snuggled under blankets, which I needed for the first time on this damp misty day, and glanced round the room which was to be my bedroom, bathroom, dining-room, sitting-room and concert hall for the next eight months.

The room was fifty feet long, thirty feet wide and about

fifteen high. The walls were a whitish yellow except for the bottom six feet, which looked like streaky grey marble and sounded hollow when tapped. On one side there were four french windows overlooking the courtyard and the Italian soldiers' barracks, and on the other there were four big windows with the glass in the lower half painted over. At first we were not allowed to open these because of the road which was fifty yards away, but soon this absurd restriction was removed and we could look out of the window all day at the passers-by and the view. Across the road was a lunatic asylum and one or two other widely separated public buildings standing in their own grounds, and these faded into a country landscape which was backed by a high range of hills, the lower slopes of the Alps. In the middle of that side of the room was a door leading to the lavatories and wash-place, which jutted out from the main building. In the centre of the room were two radiators, between which was ranged a long trestle table with benches. The floor was paved with white, dull black and dull red stone. There were four lights with low power bulbs under china shades, and a blue night-lamp over the door leading to the wash-place. The beds were all round the walls and one on each side of both of the radiators, which were placed lengthwise in the room, and every bed had beside it a light blue locker with two shelves and either a glass or metal top. There were doors at both ends, one leading to the landing and stairs, and the other, a temporary boarded affair, leading into the small room where the six British doctors and the padre lived and moved and had their being. My bed was at one end, the third from the window and next but one to the door leading to the landing.

In these pleasant surroundings I went to sleep, and awoke soon after to listen eagerly to the old hands' description of life in the hospital. They had been the first prisoners to arrive three weeks before, and had found the place in a state of complete unreadiness, without even an interpreter. They had been guarded very carefully while the Italians were surrounding the hospital with a bank of barbed wire and a chain of flood-lamps, but now that the place was supposed to be

reasonably secure they did not have an Italian soldier lounging in the room the whole time. Now there was an Italian officer interpreter, who seemed to be efficient, and we had English doctors, although the Italian doctors still had their own wards and took full responsibility for everything that went on. No mail, no Red Cross parcels or clothes or books, no cigarettes, no money, and no facilities for opening accounts so that we could buy necessities. Everything to which we had been entitled had been asked for, but Rome was very slow and the organization was a little upset by the sudden influx of prisoners, so we did not expect any fulfilment of our demands just yet.

The food was better than in any other camp or hospital in Italy, we were told, and in truth it was good, although time eventually dulled its virtues and accentuated its lack of variety. Here again, a bare recital of the daily menu makes listeners lift their hands in horror and say, "What! Do you mean to tell us that you lived on that alone for six weeks before the Red Cross parcels began to arrive?" and I have to reply to my shame that not only I lived and thrived on it, but that fit men with slight wounds, who were up and about all day, also thrived on it. For breakfast there were ersatz coffee made with milk, unsweetened, and two rolls. For lunch there were a bowl of macaroni soup, a little meat and vegetable and three rolls, while the officers had the additional refinements of a little wine (often very queer) and fruit, and for supper we had rice soup, followed by a cold vegetable and either cheese or jam or a rissole, and two rolls. This diet was of far better quality than that served to the Italian soldiers guarding us, and I believe that we were actually given more bread than the civilian ration. The nuns were responsible for the food, and frequently added to the diet things from their kitchen garden, but it must not be forgotten that the basic ration of bread and meat was supplied by the Italian government, which must take credit for feeding wounded prisoners better than its own fit soldiers.

The nuns were also responsible for the cleanliness of the ward, and in a small measure acted as nursing sisters, although

the whole time I was a prisoner I never saw any real nursing done, except for the ministrations of slightly wounded men to badly wounded ones. Our little suora did everything in her power to help us, supplying clean shirts, towels and sheets or extra pillows whenever asked, and often bringing up for distribution a pocketful of tomatoes or onions. She had not a single word of English, and absolutely willed people to understand her clearly enunciated words and little gestures. She had to look after our ward of thirty officers and another ward of troops, she was present at all operations, and had also the care of our food, so that by the time she had done her regulation six hours of daily praying she had little time left to give to individuals, either for nursing or for dalliance. She also gave orders to the Italian medical orderlies, who were quite pleasant and willing to help if they could be found and were not asleep. Two of them were very great sleepers, and one was a very great snorer who must have known of his failing, as he never objected when awoken in the middle of the night by a well-directed slipper.

In the early days of our stay there there was an Italian doctor who supervised in the ward, and two Red Cross sisters who appeared to watch the daily dressings, but soon they were all removed and we were unable to speculate morbidly about the charms of the two sisters. Opinion was divided about their value, as one was thin and the other wore glasses and walked badly, but most of us agreed that we would kick neither out of the bed in our present state.

We were a motley collection of officers, all of whom had been taken prisoner since the start of the battle. Tank regiments supplied the largest number, then came the air force, artillery and infantry in that order, and last of all, two naval men. We had been captured at all places from Gazala to El Alamein, except Tobruk, for there the fighting had not been severe, many of the people captured there not having had a sight of the enemy when told to lay down their arms. The only people who were anything to do with Tobruk, apart from three tank people who were wounded there and had been caught some miles along the coast, were the two naval men,

who had been trying to escape on the element they could trust. During the first days everyone sat or walked in groups, exchanging the stories of their capture and discussing the battle just ended. Those discussions were endless, and yet they got us nowhere. Everyone was very bitter and sad about the defeat, casting about for explanations of it and seeking light on the subject in the stories of people in other formations or other arms of the service. Tale after tale was told of infantry boxes with inferior anti-tank artillery being overrun by German tanks, of small forces of British tanks being attacked and defeated in turn by one large force of German tanks which was not as strong in numbers as our total force, and of defenceless transport echelons being rounded up by the enemy. And yet we all knew that the Staff's original defensive plan of Gazala, supported by the brave fighting of British soldiers, had succeeded and that the Germans could have been beaten. I and many others had since been told so by our German captors, thus adding positive proof to our previous convictions.

This disease of relating the circumstances of one's capture and trying to reconstruct one's last battle is known in Italy as Prisoneritis. It lasts about three weeks at its highest pitch, then gradually relaxes its hold on the victim until it is no more than a dormant sore which can be rubbed into painful activity by fresh contacts with things like newly taken prisoners, meetings with old friends or fresh bad news. Deservedly, badly wounded prisoners do not get the disease in its severest form, because the mind must be active and free to be fully receptive to its evil influences, and badly wounded men are too busy coping with their bodies to have much spirit left for Prisoneritis. When they are convalescing they get it in a mild form which is little worse than vaccination, but they are generally so glad to be well again and out of bed that it soon passes off. The expected standard of living becomes very much lower than normal for a man who is wounded and in bed, so that when he is better the life of an ordinary prison camp looms on his horizon like a golden dawn land after his night journey on the dark sea of suffering. Fit men or men

with slight wounds are ideal victims of Prisoneritis. It is hard to say whether young men or old men get it worse, but usually veterans of many battles are more affected than men who get captured in their first show, because they have been in contact with the reality of war a long time, whereas the unblooded people are really still in the "dream of war" state in which most normal people live who have not had the crushing desolate face of war unveiled to them personally.

The symptoms of Prisoneritis are well known. A man afflicted with the disease sometimes talks too much, sometimes listens to others and tries to guide them into saying something consoling, and spends a lot of time by himself gazing out of the window. He is immoderately overjoyed to discover someone who shares his interests, knows any of his friends, or used to haunt the same places in the town or country. The better his character the harder it is to be sure he has Prisoneritis, for if he is a decent fellow he conceals the disease by helping others who are (or seem to be by their complaints) in a more unfortunate position than himself, by taking a leading part or lending a hand in organizing the camp or hospital for the betterment of its inmates, and by chaffing imaginary invalids into normality. The sufferer who is visibly affected should be shown people who are worse off than himself and should be encouraged in every way to help them. He should be told the strange truth, unbelievable when one is suffering from severe Prisoneritis, that Time heals all things. If he does not react to sympathetic treatment he should be impressed with three other things, his own unimportance, the importance of others, and the certainty that the Allies can win the war without him. If he still shows no signs of improving, only outright derision is likely to succeed. We were lucky in having no serious victims of Prisoneritis amongst us, partly, I think, because we were all wounded, and partly because there was a remarkably high standard of conduct set by the two senior officers, a standard which the majority of the others emulated.

XI

THE EIGHT QUIET MONTHS

(i) *August to December, 1942*

THE account of the eight months I spent at this, my final destination, is not crammed full of events, dangers and diverse characters like the chronicle of my journey from El Alamein. During these eight months there was a slow general movement from a depth to a height in all important things. The scale was tipped from the Allies being at their lowest, us with our backs to Alexandria and Darwin and the Russians half expelled from the Caucasus, to the Germans being as good as out of Africa and back to the Kuban bridgehead, and the battle for Guadalcanar being in progress. When I arrived the prospect of being repatriated was distant though expected, and when I left it was as certain as we dared to think anything could be in Italy. At the beginning my legs were a mass of wounds and at the end they were practically healed, although my left leg was still in plaster. In the early days we had no Red Cross facilities and by the time we left we were getting food parcels regularly, the library was increasing monthly, and the hospital was organized as well as possible with the exception that the wireless we were promised never materialized. At first we had an Italian orderly who could do very little except bring necessities to bed-patients, and long before we left the hospital was being kept clean and the patients looked after by a competent group of New Zealand medical orderlies under a good warrant officer. We began by being thirty officer patients, and when the last party for repatriation went there was only one left behind.

The action of this small balance, slowly tipping our end of the scale from low to high over a period of eight months, never catches one off guard with a spasm of horror or chaos. It just moves gradually. There are hardly any revolutionary ups and downs in it, and as we were not allowed to bring

written matter from Italy I kept no diary which would enable me to put down exact dates. Time, our dominant ally and enemy, with its slowly turning months, supplies the only possible measure for the narrative.

August. It was high summer in Italy. Before the shutters were opened at seven o'clock in the morning the strong sunlight forced its peering way between the laths and diminished the blue night light to an area of light no larger than its own circumference, and before we were properly awake the heat made itself felt. The hillside to the north was parched brown, and when I looked out of the window my eye felt rested every time it recorded an area of shade beneath a tree or along a wall.

Insect life was at once vigorous and lazy, vigorous in its teeming multiplicity of number and variety and its electric scurryings and buzzings, lazy in its ability to squat or lie basking meditatively in the sun. Wasps and bees used our ward as a club-room, meandering in, settling for a moment, then meandering out again, like so many old men who have nothing better to do than totter to the letter-rack in their club every few hours. Large flies, small flies, blue-bottles and green flies explored the shady air currents between the stone floor and high ceiling, or mountaineered laboriously on the beds, radiators and tables, some playing the game of dashing themselves full tilt against windows and delighting in their ability to withstand the shock. Outside on the walls lizards wriggled up and down between their favourite fly-catching positions, obvious when they were on the move, but so hard to see when still that even when one had watched them running it was difficult to make them out when they stopped. How different were the harmless antics of these little creatures from the intense activity of their Tobruk relations! There they had a carefully calculated and meticulously carried out policy of destruction and rapacity where human peace of mind and belongings were concerned; they could take a man in the space of a few minutes from deep and irresponsible slumber to an intense and horrified wakefulness which made him watch their every movement fearfully, and in moments when he was

off guard they could send him into a state bordering on panic by climbing stealthily into his ear and suddenly shouting heaven down, or getting beneath the bedclothes and rushing out unexpectedly. Here they were too few in number ever to dare disobey the lofty dismissal wave of the human hand, and were mostly content to perform their independent sky sarabandes in the midway air. It was a credit to the hunting instincts and abilities of Englishmen that so many of the white coverlets were littered with corpses before lunch on a day of normal activity. During those early days at the hospital, when there was nothing to do, I spent most of my time watching flies, chiefly the ones which circled the two lights at my end of the ward, because that was the area my eyes covered most naturally when I was lying on my back.

I have said that there were no books, but there were in fact about two, one of which was F. S. Smythe's account of the Kangchenjunga Expedition. Getting hold of a book was such a rare occurrence that I immersed myself in it, forgetting everything in the titanic splendour and gloom of that assailed but unassailable mountain, drinking in the slightly monotonous descriptions of it from all angles and the views from various points on the Kangchenjunga range, and following the fortunes of the assault party so sympathetically that I wished that history need not have been followed in the book. Scores of times in my imagination I stood on the summit of the mountain, surveying the awful chasms of rock and ice with the serene exultation of the conqueror. This gave me a taste for mountaineering books, and later on, when books began to arrive from the Red Cross, I read everything I could find on the subject.

When the brief mental flurry of reading about Kangchenjunga was over I went back to the occupation, a new one which exercised the mind and also fulfilled a wish, of planning menus. This I did in company with another tank officer, who had spent barely three weeks in Egypt before being hustled up to El Alamein and into the German maw. Menus were planned for different circumstances and pockets so that we would not have a surfeit of luxurious foods. Here is a typical

situation in which we found ourselves in our imagination.

On our way to the Saturday rugger match you nearly missed your train and had to forgo your lunch. It was a cold and muddy day, and you have lost the match. What will you eat and drink after your hot bath?

This game occupied at least an hour a day for both of us, but after about a fortnight we had more or less exhausted its possibilities, as well as tried the patience of our neighbours, who preferred not to remember such things. Occasionally parodies of questions shot into the air above the general hubbub:

You are the last man left alive in a lifeboat in the Mediterranean. All your rations and water have gone. What are you having for supper on the tenth day?

or You are taking part in a British advance across the desert. A bomb drops within a mile of your transport echelon. On what do you expect to live for the next three days?

There was one fellow there who had been in the Italian hospital at Derna when Mussolini paid his visit to the desert in expectation of a triumphant entry into Alexandria on his white horse. Mussolini had spoken to him in good English and asked him if he was being well treated and how he felt. The answer in both cases should have been "bloody awful", but as on so many occasions when a man gets a chance to speak a great truth, he made non-committal replies, and the little bald man passed on to the next bed.

A Gurkha officer came in with an enormous cancer on his throat, which the Italians had previously aggravated with their periodically inquisitive knives, and was put facing me in the bed beside the radiator for a short time. He was in great pain the whole time and I think he knew he was going to die. Unfortunately he hardly spoke any English, so that the attempts of people to cheer him up probably caused him a great effort in his state of pain, especially as he was an Indian and not used to living in a room full of Englishmen. He was very brave, but I shall never forget the whites of his eyes as he sat there, sometimes rocking from side to side in an attempt to take his mind off the pain. When he was moved to the

other end of the ward he was barely strong enough to sit up, and after a few nights during which he moaned heart-rendingly in spite of the drugs given him, he died.

During these early days I was in practically no pain apart from the steadily diminishing nerve twinges in my vanished foot, which had by now moved upwards so that the sole of it itched and tickled about on a level with the top of my left calf. After I had been in the hospital ten or eleven days my broken leg was X-rayed for the first time and put into a complete plaster, through which the discharge from the wounds soon showed.

September. The first part of this month was very pleasant. I was strong enough to sit up for quite a long time, and used to watch the bridge four who played every night on the next bed. From my bed I could not quite see the life of the outside world going on in the roadway, so I used to get two people to carry me to the bed nearest the window, which belonged to a man with a partly paralysed hand who was up and about all day. There I spent a pleasant hour every day, watching and reflecting. The main attraction, of course, was the large number of girls on bicycles, who formed a sympathetic link with the world we had known and would only know again at some distant future date. There was something new about every girl, in the way she sat back on the saddle and meandered across the road from side or side, or leant forward against the wind with her hair and skirts streaming back and her body working in an energetic rhythm, or working crabwise at the pedals because of a shopping-bag held in one hand. Often they passed by in twos and threes, making a splash of colour in sight and sound with their bright and contrasted dresses and trilling voices. Every girl was an unviolated paragon of beauty to us at that range of over fifty yards, an illusion which persisted until months later, when an officer who was escorted into the town to visit a dentist, having more regard for common truth than the happiness of enchantment lent by a distant view, reported on his return that he had hardly seen a pretty girl, and as for the ones on bicycles they were like highly painted marionettes.

There was a man in a black cape and wide-brimmed black hat, the reincarnation of some necromancer or alchemist of a medieval court, who slouched past rapidly on most days with a stooping menacing gait, never looking to right or left, and hugging his arms close to his body beneath his billowing cape, as if they were holding the secret formula of the philosopher's stone, or the dark future fate of some popular prince. The sight of him vanishing where a building of communal flats obscured the road always sent my idle mind back several hundred years.

Towards evening the road would become less crowded. My eyes would stop looking for the dim outlines of the silent figures which occasionally walked or cycled along it, and look beyond, where the shadows congregated under the orchard trees of the lunatic asylum, where the far buildings loomed quietly out of their dark screen of indistinguishable trees, or where the hill set its bulk, dull and solid though suffused with the rose of evening, against a deep blue sky with its twilight superscription of green and violet. Always this quiet of evening, in which nature seems to put a seal on all human activity and render all time co-existent, took me irresistibly to the places where I had been and wished to go now, to Luxor and Assuan with Nina and Edmond, to Sidi Bishr, and the Corniche at Alexandria from which, motoring westwards at the end of a day of sun and sea-bathing, I used to watch at this time of day the sun drop below the sea-line with a final flash, and the eastern harbour soften with its pink ships. With the comparative absence of pain my mind had been set free, so that more and more I lived in the past and future, outsoaring the bounds of barbed wire and the daily circumstances of prison life. When I was at the window I was happier if no one came to speak to me, though I was glad enough to have company at other times. There was only one other man who occasionally showed obvious signs of wishing to be alone, and he used to stand by the window farthest from the largest group of people, leaning on the sill and humming "Deep Purple" endlessly, showing absolutely no consideration for rhythm and concerning himself solely with the amount of expression

he could put into the notes that seemed most important. Often he would leave a gap of a few seconds before launching his voice on to a heartbreaking note with a great sob.

With my wounds doing so well, I soon became desperately interested in the affairs of the outside world and the way of the war. We had an officer who had been captured in the commando raid on Bardia in April 1941, who during his long captivity had learnt to speak Italian fluently, and he used to read us the news from the only paper we were allowed, the *Popolo d'Italia*. He also used to get hold of the *Relazioni Internazionali*, an excellent weekly paper which printed all the Allied communiqués, usually about a fortnight after they were issued, but this paper was forbidden after a short time. From other sources we heard of the abortive German attack in the desert in August, when Rommel pushed a force of fifty tanks down the barrel track to Cairo. We were glad in a mild way, but not joyous, only half believing that there could be a British success after that frightful summer business which had left such a deep mark on our spirits.

About three weeks after my leg was put in plaster I began to get pricking pains at the site of the fracture, and I asked the man next to me, who had broken one of his legs a month before I had been wounded, if he had had similar pains two months after being wounded. He airily replied that of course he had and it was just the bone knitting, and implied in the most subtle way that I was making a song and dance about nothing. The pain increased, and spread farther down the shin-bone, where there was one particular spot which stabbed a light through my nerves every few seconds like a lighthouse beam which periodically shatters the calm dark of night. I said nothing to the doctors as yet, assuming that what I was being put through was just part and parcel of the ritual performed by nature over the mending of one of her sacred members. In the evenings the pains became worse, and I sweated a lot, though still continuing to eat my evening meal. I tried all sorts of positions to ease my leg, putting it up, hanging it down, pressing my toes downwards against the plaster, sitting up and lying down. I had never yet slept more than

four hours of proper sleep before this, always waking in the early hours of the morning and dozing fitfully until dawn, but now the increased pain turned those seemingly endless hours before daylight into a period of anxiety and fretfulness, though nothing near agony.

And now came the last storm-blast of pain I was to suffer, and it was tyrannous and strong, chasing me along with great beats from its tremendous wings for two weeks of agony before it paused; then it buffeted me for another couple of days with weaker blasts, and paused again before giving me two or three slight reminders of what I had been through. Fortunately I was easily strong enough to bear the onslaught, and the only adverse effects on me were that I ate little during it and felt weak and bad-tempered the whole time.

The pain spread all round the leg, embracing it in a circle of fire, with a protracted ache at the back of the leg and sharp persistent pain on the bone crystallizing at two points into jets of white flame which when they spurted made me jerk my whole body in the effort to yield to the pain. I did not think such pain could exist. A sort of flickering and gradually intensifying pins and needles in the bone would crawl in slowly tightening circles and suddenly explode in a tremendous jab at the tenderest places, and this happened every minute or two. I told the doctor, who started giving me sleeping draughts and told me to tell him if it became worse. It did become worse. The pain at the back of my leg spread to behind the knee, and I asked him to take off the plaster, watching with the magnified apprehension of pain the approach of the disorder towards my body, and having horrible visions of my losing my only leg and wondering, if I did lose it, whether they would save my left knee.

As before when I was in pain, the nights were worse than the days. The fever which usually settled on me soon after lunch at this period wore me down to a stub of moroseness by about supper-time, when I took a little of the liquid part of the soup and generally managed to eat my fruit. I began to sweat profusely, and gasp when the flames in my leg spurted. I craved company. Usually in the evening a large gathering

assembled at our end of the room to hear the news read out from the *Popolo d'Italia*, and after it was over they remained discussing the war and gradually drifted down to subjects lighter and lighter as the evening wore on. I was very grateful for this, but by nine o'clock I was tired out, and hated the noise which went on until ten, at which time the lights were put out. I hated lying there looking at the two dim lights burning like dull resentful suns in my consciousness, minute by minute, with me asking the time every few minutes and marvelling sickly that time could go so slowly. After asking the time I would send my mind on an organized tour, and after—between the jabs of pain—it had faithfully recorded and explored all the possibilities of, say, a summer holiday on Dartmoor, or a week in Alexandria after a desert battle, I would come back to the present with the happy conviction that at least a quarter of an hour must have passed since I last asked the time. But no—it was usually five minutes.

At this time the shutters were let down at about half-past eight as far as I remember, that is to say black-out time, and any time between then and midnight we were likely to hear singing. Often a group of people would saunter down the road, singing a part song beautifully. The sound of it came first faintly in a lull between the conversation and laughter, gradually came nearer, increasing in volume until everyone stopped talking to listen to it, increasing until one could almost hear the different singers drawing their breath, then slowly fading, fading until it was so quiet that people in the room expressed regret at its departure, fading still farther away until its blended notes only came to me in quiet eddies between the gusts of resumed conversation and laughter, fading until it was inaudible and I was left alone again with my pain. Just before lights out I was given a sleeping draught, and another pill to take in the night if the first was not strong enough. Usually I needed them all at once. I fell asleep at any time between half-past ten and eleven, always having as my last conscious sensation an awareness of a great grey sea of pain which reached to the uttermost fringes of my being. When I was asleep I did not dream, but moaned con-

tinuously. At half-past twelve, or one, or two, the curtains round my resting nerves were withdrawn. Not suddenly, as a late sleeper is awakened by the unruly sun, but gradually, the light of wakefulness made its way through the steadily thinning veil of curtains, and I fought it desperately as I gave ground before it and was forced to take it in. When it first appeared, like a visitation from a ghost so fleeting that I thought I might forget it, I tried to make my mind relax into oblivion and pretended that I was asleep again. Sometimes I partly succeeded, but then in my drowsy stupor I would dream that I was awake again, and again my sluggish thoughts would slowly freeze into the horrible semblance of wakefulness, so that it was seldom more than a few minutes before this light of wakefulness, artificially stoked by the furnace in my leg, had chased me far from the desirable haven of sleep. After every crescendo of pain I fought what seemed to me the sanest and most reasonable battle in an effort to lose consciousness before the next one came, but I rarely succeeded.

The town was full of bells, an old academic town full of towers and famous in history, and these bells began to toll at about four o'clock in the morning, ringing impossibly energetic worshippers to early mass. There were two peals of four bells each, I remember, which used to start first of all and toll against each other, sometimes in turn, sometimes overlapping and sometimes together, haphazardly clashing and sending desultory waves of clanking sound out across the still darkness. Then there was a single bell which seemed to toll for hours on end quite near by, and it was this slow and monotonously tolling bell that seemed to get on our nerves most. There was one middle-aged officer, the area of whose wounds was very large, who had so much poison in his system that he did not have full control over himself, and he used to lie sunken in his bed at the other end of the ward counting out the strokes of this damned bell in a deep voice: "One!—Two!—Three!—Four!" An Indian officer with a hole in his back, also at the other end of the ward, spent all the nights coughing and spitting, sometimes crying out in a thin wavering voice to the Italian orderly, who was usually snoring him-

self and had to be awakened by some person sufficiently mobile to get out of bed and shake him.

Night after night the pain increased, until I was in such a state that long before dawn I was sitting up and moving some part of my body all the time so as to keep my thoughts from drowning in the torrents of pain which swept through my leg. I rubbed other parts of my body, I moved my toes, and I worked my knee muscles, which latter had the temporary effect of blunting the sharpness of the pain and changing it to a dull hot ache. I never gave up the attempts to relax in between, but as daybreak drew near I began to look forward to a paradisaical horizon of light instead of a purgatorial prison of darkness. The bells began to multiply in number, the deep-voiced counting went on at the other end of the ward, and an occasional cart was heard to go by with a consonant rumbling of wheels and noise of hoof-beats. If the horse snorted as it passed in that forsaken dawn twilight, the sound was to me a veritable fanfare of the approaching sunrise, and I eagerly listened for sounds of the hospital awaking. Bells and still more bells, ringing into the stirring air, and then the first morning choir would start its chanting, penetrating my vault of pain with its sweet promise of day and human activity. Then there would be a grunt and a yawn from the chair in the middle of the room, followed by the sound of a man putting on his boots, and after a short scrabbling of hobnails on the stone floor, the Italian orderly would get to his feet, put on the light, and begin sweeping the floor. It was almost daytime, not quite daytime because everyone else was dozing or asleep, and I could sit up and watch this marvellous sweeping going on. Sometimes, on his excursions between the beds, he would knock over one of the metal stools, whose contact with the stone floor would shatter the quiet with a piercing clangour and make everyone curse and turn over. Then, after what seemed an age of sweeping, during which he moved round the room as slowly as a minute hand round a clock, and another age of inactivity broken only by the stirrings and coughings of the patients, the bell for morning coffee would ring out, resolute and strong. Up

blinds! Welcome day! And I sat up listening to the clattering of the tureens of coffee downstairs, followed their rattling upstairs, and sighed with the deepest relief when the double doors opened and the suora came in behind a steaming trolley-load.

Reluctantly the room shook off the warm embrace of sleep, and drowsy gibes began to flop heavily across from bed to bed as one man cursed another for snoring and someone else asked the world at large if we could expect any dressings that day, while the suora went round to the people who refused to wake up, put her tiny hand on their pillows or shoulders and said in a pleading voice, "Lattel! Lattel! Caffè lattel!" After a few weeks in the hospital someone taught her to say "Good morning", which she pronounced "Goo' moawnin!" Every time she was made to say it she tried to behave as if it came quite naturally to her, and went on with what she was doing with a studied and serious air beneath which lurked an infant laughter. People used to bestir themselves specially to say "Good morning, suora!"

After morning coffee everyone sank back exhausted for a further period of rest and contemplation which was less disturbed by the sufferers than the last few hours of the night, for there is some quality in light that lessens pain. It is the time of day when the body is most rested and most capable of coping with its afflictions. I nearly always slept for half an hour or an hour after the blinds had been let up, even when I had been in great pain only an hour before.

At last, when I had had a temperature of 103 for four days, when the glands in my groin were hard and painful and my plaster was hot to the touch, the doctor suddenly decided to have a look under the plaster. On the way down the inside of my knee the shears ploughed through a large shallow wound just over the bone, and the blood swilled along in the path of the shears. The pain was great, but now I was braced to meet it in the more or less certain knowledge that we were getting to the root of the trouble, and suffered none of the doubts and apprehensions which are the most formidable adjuncts of pain. The top half of the plaster was lifted off,

and showed nothing worse at the tenderest place than a general inflammation, while the wound over the fracture looked normal. When the bottom half was removed, however, the back of my leg, where there had been no wounds before, opened in two places, one of them more than an inch across, and a jet of thick black liquid shot out, followed by streams of pus. The smell was vile. The relief was instantaneous, for my temperature went down to normal and I ate a large supper.

October. At the beginning of this month letters began to arrive for people who had been captured early in the summer battle, and henceforward whenever the Italian corporal interpreter came in, a press of inquiring and expectant men surrounded him. The lucky people who got letters were overjoyed at first, but soon began complaining that they had only heard from the family and not the girl-friend, or that someone they barely knew had sent the first letter that got through to them. If a week went by before their second letters arrived, they became as anxious and eager as those who had not received any at all. At last, half-way through this month, a letter arrived from my mother, the first she had written, after hearing from the War Office that I was a prisoner and receiving a letter from me on the same day. Other people had received their parents' or wives' second letters first, and so did not get the full relief and affection which fill every word of the first letter, but I was lucky, as the first letter I received was the best I could have had. At this distance in time, although the letter has long been destroyed and gone to further the enemy's salvage drive, I can remember it clearly. First of all my mother wrote that she had felt sure she would hear from me soon, then followed a list of friends who had written her letters of congratulation and sent her messages for me, then came a surprise for me when she wrote that my squadron leader in his letter to her had said that I had been recommended for the Military Cross (which I never got, as a matter of fact), and lastly came a short account of her preparations to send me a parcel. Before this the letters I had written had been full of repetition in

case my first letters did not get home, but now that my mother knew my address I no longer had to worry about circularizing my friends at the rate of one a week, and could leave her to pass on any information to everyone except friends in Egypt. I wrote periodically to these, sometimes by letter and sometimes by card to try and make sure of reaching them, but had I known it, they were already in touch with my mother.

Late in September or early in October the labours of the senior officer and the interpreter began to bear fruit. Our accounts arrived, and we were able every ten days to compile a shopping list, which the interpreter officer took into the town. At first we were allowed to buy large numbers of Italian cigarettes and large quantities of fruit, but later this was altered and the cigarette ration was reduced, while soon we were not allowed to buy any fruit at all, the reason given being that we were supplied with fruit by the hospital every day. One of the best food items we could buy was confectionery. At the beginning we were allowed to buy almost unlimited quantities of sweets, which were quite good although lacking the sugar which would have made them perfect. It was nothing for an idle officer to consume half a kilo of sweets on a hot afternoon, and it was this excess which caused the sweets to be limited to half a kilo per shopping list per officer. As at about this time the quality of the sweets suddenly deteriorated only the irreconcilable sweet-tooths felt the pinch, and the rest of us soon forgot that we could purchase sweets at all.

The first consignment of Red Cross Food Parcels arrived, and from then until we left we lived in comparative luxury. As I have said, the food of the hospital was adequate in the first place, in striking contrast to the rations of the ordinary prison camps, but now with the advent of a regular parcel issue we often had more than enough, and finicky people could even afford to pick and choose what they ate. The greatest advantage of Parcels (they should always have a capital P!) was that they conferred on one the limitless delight of being able to camouflage the bread, which this month changed from quite good to fairly indifferent, as it had its components

altered to include more than a little maize. This was especially true of the Canadian Parcels, which included a pound of butter and a pound of marmalade or jam. The British Parcels contained less to spread on bread, but were much better balanced as there were more and varied things to cook. For this reason they were preferred in the camps where the Italian food ration was poor, but we preferred the Canadian ones as our basic food ration was very good.

We had no stove for cooking as yet, as the stove was one of those items we had been promised. When we asked how soon we were getting it, the answer was always "Domani", which is actually Italian for "to-morrow", but used in this sense it means "fairly soon". If the Italians said we would get something "Dopo domani", which means literally "the day after to-morrow", we knew that they meant "some time or other". These two euphemisms for longer periods, "domani" and "dopo domani", were constantly on the lips of the Italians, and when we took them to task about them they seemed to accept what we said as a graceful compliment to their lazy and procrastinating way of life. As we had no stove the Italians agreed to make tea or cocoa for us every day at four o'clock, and to heat tins from Parcels on alternate days and serve them with the evening meal. This threw fresh work on the shoulders of the little nuns, but the system worked admirably the whole time I was there, and if ever there was a hitch about the food it was usually the fault of ourselves or the interpreter officer in not delivering the food at the appointed time and place. Frequently we forgot to give the suora the packet of tea or cocoa for the next day or two, and she would glide in with her tiny feet barely showing beneath her huge skirt and her minute hand outstretched, and produce the strange syllable "Tea?"

With the money we could now spend we were able to ask the interpreter to get us continental editions of English and American books, and we soon had a library of about thirty Tauchnitz and Albatross books, most of which made poor reading. There were many crime stories, two or three books by Ludwig Lewisohn and about five Pearl Bucks. But the

best things for four or five of us were the two volumes of Shakespeare's plays which we managed to get. Unfortunately only the volumes containing the less well-known plays were left in the shop, the only well-known ones being "Julius Caesar" and "Romeo and Juliet", but this may have been good for us, as we were now forced to read the historical plays, and of course found plenty of meat in them. Later we discovered an edition of Shakespeare plays with English on one side of the page and on the other a literal translation into Italian which often amused us. One speech in particular that read funnily in plain Italian was the opening speech in "Twelfth Night". I also managed to get hold of a fairly complete Shelley, which of course omitted the act of "Prometheus Unbound" I like best, and an anthology of British and American verse compiled by Ludwig Lewisohn which contained some strange American verse, but included some poems not usually found in anthologies, such as Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes". Henceforward I was never at a loss for poetry, though sometimes hankering after the gigantic intensity of "King Lear" and the passionate metaphysics of Donne.

There was no British Roman Catholic padre in the hospital, and the work was done by an Italian who was an exception to the general rule of benevolence and holiness which we found applied to the priests and nuns of the Catholic Church. He was a real squarehead, with closely cropped grey hair, a large drooping stomach and rather sensual lips; in fact we inclined to the belief that he was a German, as he always spoke in German when surprised and received many letters from Germany. He was always bad-tempered and short with us when things were going badly for the Axis, but when things were going well he went through all the wards waving and smiling to everyone and stopping and talking in jocular fashion with all the bed-patients. He had a deep hollow tomb-like voice which was speedily imitated and parodied by all the troops, who, once they realized what sort of a person he was, treated him as an amusing diversion. Because of the flat black hats worn by priests they were generally known as bookmakers,

and "spotting bookmakers" on the road outside became a game like "beaver" or "hag-at-a-gate" in England. However, a name of special hate was coined for our particular bookmaker, and we called him "the black rat". During the two months prior to the effective operation of Red Cross facilities he could have done much to brighten our captivity, but never lifted a finger to help us, even finding excuses for not granting the simplest requests. In the early days he would not even try to get us paper and pencils. In other camps that were put up in a hurry and had no facilities for the large influx of prisoners the Italian priests did all they could, helping Catholics and non-Catholics impartially.

Now that we had money and could buy Italian grammars written in English the black rat began teaching Italian to the medical officers and officer patients, the idea behind it being, we thought, his desire to improve his own colloquial English, which was bad, and to rub the rust off his English grammar, which was good. The class was held at my end of the room for an hour before lunch twice a week beside the open window which looked to the north, but although we found the language easy and similar to French, we never made much progress because of the lack of opportunity and necessity to speak it. We could read the newspapers, but that was about all.

The Italian orderlies were removed gradually, being sent off to Russia or Greece one by one until there were only two left. The men who were sent away hated going, and for days before their departure we painted to them the horrors of life on active service in hostile countries. They responded well to this treatment, having the Italian trait of highly developed stage-consciousness, and thoroughly enjoyed the sympathy and commiseration showered on them.

This month my stump ceased to bother me, and I was able to lie on my left side for an hour or two at a time. My left leg began on its own a series of great eruptions to expel the accumulation of dead bone, pus and metal fragments of which nature disapproved so thoroughly. A hole appeared on the left side of the shin-bone and widened and deepened until it covered a square inch and was half an inch below the surface

of the leg. It was possible to put a probe in each side of the bone and touch underneath, while lower down the bone two small holes appeared and began to discharge. I had a small plaster sore on the ankle and a large one on the sole of my foot. Both sides of my knee went soggy and gave out little bits of metal. The two holes which had appeared under the knee when the plaster was removed healed after about three weeks. The leg was a mass of dressings. All this progress was not made without pain, although I never again went through the agony I suffered before the plaster was taken off. I was usually feverish and in pain for a day or two before each new hole appeared, but the moment my temperature went down to normal I was full of beans and wondering how I could possibly have been so depressed a few hours before.

Towards the end of October we began to detect behind the smooth facility of the penning of the Axis communiqués a slight apprehension concerning future British moves, an apprehension they strove to smother by covering the front pages of their newspapers with fantastic figures of the huge shipping losses we were suffering, and individual stories of the destruction wrought and the heroism shown by their intrepid submarine commanders. There was one tale about an Italian ocean-going submarine which had dared the portals of Gibraltar and ventured with brilliant success into the awful defence ring of a British Atlantic convoy, and there were pictures of the submarine on its return to port, garlanded and with its crew in a shower of kisses and congratulatory senior officers. Also, the number of British aircraft shot down in the Mediterranean battle area increased as the number of their own planes lost decreased. Then at last we knew. On the 24th October the balloon went up at El Alamein, and the hitherto vague yearnings of my mind towards an Allied victory were transfigured into a concentrated will to be with the regiment in spirit. Over and over again I was with the boys in battle, imagining every phase and hour of the day of fright and iron rigour, bringing into all my daydreams a glorious fulfilment of my most deeply seated desires. I was out in front of the regiment doing my old job of reconnaissance, sending

back reports to Richard, and watching our heavy tanks come rumbling up into position. Behind us lay two years of appalling wastage of life during which tank regiments had done battle with inferior equipment and held their own, thus showing the superiority of our crews over the German crews, and now we were meeting Jerry with equipment as good as his and a superiority in numbers. Day after day we scanned the papers for a clue as to what was really going on. The excitement and suspense in the ward were continuous. There was a resurgence of battle memories as every officer lived again with his unit and prayed impotently for a great and glorious victory. Tank men sought each other out and walked up and down discussing what tactics might be used by Montgomery at El Alamein, and how the armoured divisions could best be utilized on such a narrow front; gunners got together in the mysterious conclaves into which artillerymen go and decided it was sure to be a gunner's battle; the infantrymen considered the affair and assured themselves that the mistakes of the summer battle would not be repeated and that their regiments would not be left in the lurch again, and the many pilots who had been shot down in the summer battle while grimly keeping the air British with inferior planes but superior numbers sat round hoping the army wasn't going to do what it usually did, and wondering which of their friends was in each astronomical tally of British planes the enemy claimed to have shot down. The only news item which gave us any idea of what was going on was a quotation from a Cairo communiqué, which was found at the bottom of a column and mentioned the clearing of heavy mine-fields, and October went out into the fading autumn in a deluge of distant explosions which tended towards the fulfilment of the supreme ambition of our beings.

November. The month began with a damp and muggy spell of weather. It finally screened off the glorious golden autumn which had danced outside the hospital windows for so long, and temporarily denied us the marvellous pageants at dawn and dusk we had become used to watching in the sky. There had been one dawn so beautiful and richly

coloured that the people who saw it insisted on carrying me to the window on the northern side and holding me half out of it so that I could behold the gorgeous east. It was the first time I had seen the view to the east, with its motley collection of factory chimneys and bell-towers ranged against a background of low rounded purple hills. Each hill on that morning had a brilliant white halo, the refulgent crown of the dayspring, and above and around, serenely assembled in the deep blue sky, were the myriad electric hues of a beneficent heaven. The air was Elysian; clear, and sparkling with a reticent intensity which filled me with the glory of being alive and a premonition of joy to come.

Now sun-bathing in the exercise area practically ceased, so I was told, and the flowers which flourished around the dirty drains, the pick of which had been brought to adorn my bedside locker by thoughtful people, languished in the sterilizing advance-grip of the cold season. No longer in the evenings, when the weather was fine and warm and the sky's dark cloak was slivered with the lighter hues of the closing day, could we hear the adoring voices of the nuns, floating to us from the balcony where they held their evening worship. No longer, when the nuns were relaxing in the evening air, did officers come back from the lavatory window, the only one which overlooked the balcony, and report that the scene was like a children's playground, with the nuns throwing their bonnets at each other and pulling each other's short hair, laughing and shrieking.

As soon as this first damp spell of weather arrived, a chorus of complaints arose from the different wards of the hospital where there were amputation cases, for all of them began to suffer from new and strange aches and pains in their stumps. People surmised and speculated about the cause of what seemed to be a sudden general deterioration in the condition of wounds, until the doctors produced the explanation that the cause of the aches and pains was the dampness in the air. The doctors said that to the end of our lives our stumps would react in the same way to such weather, and we were all burdened with the thought of the perpetual gnawing nuisance

our wounds would be until we died, although actually when one is fit and well, one does not notice such things.

The air raids on neighbouring towns which had begun on the same day as the British offensive in the Western Desert continued with intermissions throughout the month. Their decreasing intensity puzzled the Italians and disappointed us, because we could see the effect of them on the population and knew that so far all they had done was to antagonize the Italians without frightening them, at least in the Turin and Milan areas. Of course no news of the effect on the people of the Genoa raids reached us. The raids on Milan had started off with such a bang and had continued night and day with such frequency that we had thought they were going to be kept up, as there was no point in only half doing the job.

Having the R.A.F. overhead when in hospital in the depths of Italy was a totally different business from being within two miles of the principal targets at Tobruk. I think the reason was that having once arrived safely in Italy we thought we had nothing more to fear, whereas while we were in Africa we were to all intents and purposes still on the battle-field and had to put up with the contingent risks. Now, having come through so much and still being in marvellous possession of our lives, the thought of meeting a chance death from a stray bomb dropped by Englishmen was very frightening, and the more we thought about its possibilities, the more we thought what a typical trick of ironical Fate it would be. We could always tell, or thought we could tell, by the number of long blasts on the siren, how near us the target was going to be, because four blasts were given if planes were somewhere over northern Italy and five for the Milan area. One night several weeks after the big raids on Milan, the siren blew seven long blasts, and we almost began to say our prayers, but the Italians must have been mistaken for we heard nothing. When we first heard the planes overhead we began to get nervous, and as each plane passed out of earshot we heaved sighs of relief. They always seemed so high and uncertain in direction that we were in a state of constant anticipation of hearing the whistle of bombs as long as they were anywhere near. I felt

for the bomber crews none of that feeling almost amounting to love which I had felt for the British bombers over Tobruk when I had lain below, although I was in much less danger from them here in Italy. I pictured them as efficient steel supermen from an alien world, who could have no idea of the pounding hearts beneath them. I saw them scanning our valley, our valley which simply sprouted chimneys, and seeking the spot where their bombs would do the most damage. Our hospital had a chimney, a great fat chimney which threw out the waste fumes of the hospital not fifty yards from my bed, and I had always been told that the thing that sticks out above all in moonlight to an air observer's eye is a factory chimney. I had been told that chimneys alone would give away an industrial area to a bomber. This apprehension went on night after night. I found that the moment the sirens went my legs started trembling and increased each time a bomber flew overhead until sometimes, to my shame, my bed creaked. This was a nervous reaction I furiously tried to control, but I did not succeed as a rule until the raid had been on for half an hour.

One night a bomber came over very low, and started flying up and down the valley as if looking for some special target. Its course was followed and imagined hypnotically by the entire room, and beds began to creak, while voices came hollowly on to the electric air in querulous speculation. At last the bomber seemed to come to a decision. While circling to the north it suddenly cut out its engines, and some knowledgeable man whispered, "It's starting its dive!" It was true. A second or two later the engines broke out into a terrifying roar, becoming louder every second as the plane dived down towards the hospital. I remembered dimly hearing the creaking of beds and some voice saying, "This is it!" before I suddenly left the clouds of apprehension and burst out into the light of the calm certainty that this was it, and no mistake. It roared low over the hospital, and the whistle we could already hear never came. A few seconds later it passed over the station, where some dithering Italian forced a few rounds out of his gun before it jammed. The bomber swooped round

majestically, its engines humming smoothly but snarlingly, like the buzz of an aggravated hornet, and came towards us from the east. It dropped three bombs a mile away, and the hospital shook. One dropped on a small chemical factory, demolishing it, another dropped on and cut a road bridge, killing a couple who were courting underneath, and the third bomb dropped in a field. As the plane came near again some fool of an Italian fired a light automatic into the air, and it swooped round yet again. This time it came up the road spraying bursts of machine-gun bullets every few seconds, and then it flew away, leaving a huddle of relieved, perspiring and happy Englishmen below. Next morning the Italians were very excited, each having his own anecdote about the dive over the hospital and the bombing and machine-gunning. One of them said he was crossing the yard at the time of its dive, and swore he could have hit it with a stick. Another said the plane had intended to bomb the hospital, thinking that it was a factory because of the chimney, and when it arrived over the hospital it suddenly saw the red cross on the roof and withheld its bombs. This was a charitable view, crediting British airmen with uncanny powers of observation and meticulous honour, but it was held generally in Italy. We did not destroy the idea by making the obvious comment that the red cross on the hospital was only visible in bright sunlight. There was a lot of amused discussion in the town, we heard, about the two love-birds who were destroyed through using a military objective as camouflage for their operations, which reminded us of the hilarious comments in the bars of Alexandria after the Germans had hit a certain house and killed four officers and two girls. On that occasion the stock joke had been: "Will their parents be told that they were killed in action?"

As the list of Italian towns which were bombed increased, we began to think that our turn must come sooner or later, and we even looked at the populations of other Italian towns (in a *Pears' Encyclopaedia* which we used more or less openly, although it contained maps and much information about Italy) to see what smaller towns than ours had been bombed,

There were many, and our apprehension increased after each raid, but fortunately our turn never came.

When the sirens went the shutters had to be lowered so that we could not see what was going on, a tantalizing thing because we knew that the anti-aircraft fire and bomb-flashes of the Milan raids would be in sight from our windows. One night the medical officers lay down on the floor by a french window to try and see the sky over Milan during one of the heavier raids, and a sentry fired at them, hitting the wall about two feet from the window. I do not think he meant to hit them, but just to frighten them, although the very fact that he did fire meant that if he had hit them he would have expected to be exonerated. British guards at Italian Prisoner of War hospitals, please copy.

The morning after the first raid on Milan the suora would not speak to us, and one or two remarks which were made intending to placate her got caught up in the meshes of limited language and aggravated the situation. However, I think the sisters must have discussed the question of their attitude towards prisoners concerning air raids, because ever afterwards she maintained silence on the subject, a silence we tried to reciprocate, and treated us as before. Poor dear, her mother was in Milan, and died soon after.

The hospital was becoming a less sombre place. Most of the patients had had letters from home except for the unfortunate Australians and New Zealanders captured respectively at El Alamein on 22nd July and outside Mersa Matruh at the end of June. No large train-loads of freshly captured men came in, a reassuring thing because although recently taken prisoners arrive in a hospital like stones landing in a pool, stirring the whole surface and sending out ripples and rings of earnestly desired fresh news, the fact that they have been captured indicates a British failure somewhere. Most of the patients were fit and strong, time and good food having worked on their wounded bodies to produce a state of physical normality except for the wounds themselves.

This state of physical well-being did not apply to the patients suffering from dysentery. All these, about a hundred

I think, had been left by the enemy in camps in the desert for two or three months after the British retreat to El Alamein. These camps were badly organized, having little or no sanitary accommodation, grossly overcrowded and confined living areas, and to cap everything, the food was so bad and insufficient that more than 90 per cent of the prisoners had dysentery. The average decrease in the weight of a man who had spent two months in one of these camps was three stones, while the death-rate in one camp, from sheer starvation, was from eight to ten men per day, I was told, and this amongst unwounded men. Some of the sufferers from dysentery were lucky enough to be removed to Italy, where in one hospital a hundred and fifty died in the three months up to Christmas 1942. The policy these days seems to be to treat the Italians' well-known inefficiency with indulgence, but there is a point where inefficiency becomes criminal negligence. I hope the relations and sweethearts whose menfolk were reported to have "died of dysentery in enemy hands" will not let the public forget this at the peace. It is not a question of blaming the Fascist regime, for the Italian government has generally come up to standard in its intentions towards prisoners. It is the ordinary Italian, the camp commandant, the prison guard, who is to be blamed, the same corrupt, cruel and unimaginative beast who has perpetrated in Greece wholesale massacres and rapes and burned whole villages to the ground. These things are remote from us in England, where we have never known a national subjection to an enemy army, and our innocence of these matters and lack of imagination stop us from believing that others can do things we could never do.

The last new-comers to the officers' ward arrived. One had been captured at Tobruk in the sea and land raid on the port. He had a bullet through his thigh and while he was lying on the ground wounded an Italian rushed at him with a bayonet. The wounded man just had time to get out his pistol and the Italian fell over him, dead. Concerning this Tobruk operation we learnt that for the most part the Italians had been true to form, rushing forward with their hands up, crying "Iti! Iti! Cairo! Cairo!"

Another man, a pilot, was shot down escorting some Bostons on a bombing raid on a German column in September. He baled out and landed among the troops who had been bombed. He was attended to with a cold severity and efficiency which left no room for sympathy, being taken straight to a doctor by a silent German. The doctor said as he was dressing the huge hole in his back, "Have you much pain?" and when he received an affirmative reply he pointed to a small pile of arms and legs in the corner of the tent and said, "Our men also have much pain, from your bombs."

Another pilot, a Canadian with one shoulder full of small metal fragments, had attempted to escape from the hospital train on the journey through Italy. He managed to get hold of money and a sufficient disguise, and waited until nightfall before making his attempt. The train was in motion and the Italian guard saw him just before he jumped out of the window. The poor guard tried frantically hard to disentangle his rifle sling from his shoulders, but the Italian "ready" position (for which the soldier sits down on a chair, with his rifle sling round his body and the rifle dangling at the side, and alternately coughs and snores) does not lend itself to speedy action, and the Canadian rolled down the railway embankment unharmed. The train was stopped, every carriage flashed with light, and as the pilot ran he heard the sounds of Italian pursuit, shouts, curses, commands, countermands and the sound of boots on gravel and field. After running a short distance he lay in a ditch and listened to the happy confusion until it died away. Meanwhile in the train there was pandemonium. Every prisoner was wakened up, as if this would help. The method of waking wounded men used in this emergency is interesting. They were violently shaken. Their shoes were removed and an Italian roll-call (three separate counts of the entire train-load, each having a different result) was taken, after which they were allowed to go to sleep again. After an interval—I boil to write of it—they were awakened in the same violent manner as before, and this time their socks and trousers were taken away. The escaped pilot walked northwards for four nights, lying up by day, and covered

about a hundred miles. On the fifth morning he had some difficulty in finding a place to hide, and finally when it was almost broad daylight he hurriedly hid in some hay near a farm-house. During the day a farmer came by with a pitchfork. After poking about in the hay for a minute or two he went away, much to the pilot's relief, for he now thought he was safe for the rest of the day; but only half an hour later the farmer returned with two carabinieri. He had seen the hidden man, and in the instant of seeing him had had the presence of mind to control his face. The carabinieri took away the prisoner, treated him very well, even giving him a meal in a restaurant, and complimented him on his escape, saying that one expected that sort of thing from men with red hair.

On the same hospital train was Charlie Upham, the New Zealand V.C., who had been captured in a night attack at El Alamein on the 22nd July. The Italians were so afraid of him that, although he was wounded and had one arm in an aeroplane splint, he was handcuffed to an Italian guard when he wished to use the lavatory on the train. The stories about this cool fearless dare-devil who seemed to live only to kill the enemy are numerous. When the New Zealand division fought its delaying action at Mersa Matruh and broke out of an encirclement at night, he rushed from one German lorry to another setting them on fire, and is supposed to have killed thirty-eight Germans single-handed. The day before the night attack in which he was captured, he coolly toured the German positions in a Jeep, killing a German officer while he was over there. Then he motored back through a gap in the mine-fields to his own lines, and passed on the detailed information he had gained, saying that the attack was sure to be a failure. It was, but I imagine it had to be undertaken at that time to disorganize Rommel's preparations for a decisive assault on Egypt. I remember Charlie Upham coming into the Italian hospital at Tobruk shortly before I left, draped with dirty bandages, a picture of fury and indignation against the Italians.

Came the wonderful news of the battle at El Alamein, stealing quietly into the hospital with the words of the German

communiqué, which breathed magically of their "system of elastic defence" and "prepared withdrawals in face of renewed strong enemy attacks". For days they had been claiming to have destroyed huge numbers of our tanks, and this had made me think that our attack had been of the usual type, that is to say with an armoured spearhead of such size and used with such disregard of casualties that the enemy had been gradually overwhelmed. I had no idea of the actual plan, with its diabolical whittling down of enemy armour before ours was thrown into the battle. But even now we did not realize that the victory had been huge, for all desert retreats are fast, and we saw no reason why Rommel should not retreat to El Agheila in the usual style, making us string out our long line of communications to weaken us before dealing a counter-blow. To be sure, we were a little surprised that he did not stop at the Egyptian frontier or the Derna-Mechili line. From a civilian source we heard of a B.B.C. news bulletin in which a Cairo communiqué had claimed five hundred tanks and forty thousand prisoners, and from then on we rode on the crest of the wave. Into this wide dawn of dream fulfilment came the news of the Allied landings in French North Africa, and the Italians kindly warned us not to welcome this change of Allied fortunes with any change for the worse in our discipline and behaviour.

When I had first arrived at the hospital, I had not been able to move my toes or foot upwards, and had imagined that I would have a dropped foot for the rest of my life, a dull prospect in view of the absence of my other leg. Before he ceased visiting the ward, the Italian doctor, while discussing my case with an English doctor, had given an imitation by my bed of a person with a dropped foot walking, a typical example of Italian insensitiveness, for of course the picture of myself walking rather worse than that (because of the artificial leg on the other side) stayed in my mind. Some time during November, however, I achieved a slight movement, and my last concrete anxiety was over.

December. By the beginning of this month my left leg had finished crupting and only the two large holes over the fracture

remained, pushing out little bits of bone from time to time and giving me no further trouble. Five months of intermittent pain were over. In November I had already begun to sleep better, and now I slept all night as soundly as I had ever done, suffering no more that weary wait for the dawn, when the long litany of the tolling bells had rung in a mazy repetition over the stirrings and sighings and snorings of the ward, and all sounds had functioned as minute and maddening goads in my neurotic pavilion of pain. The fracture was thought to be sufficiently healed for me to be allowed to bend my knee, although the Italians would not permit an X-ray to confirm that the bone had knitted, and I was made a new short plaster the purpose of which was to hold up my foot. After a time I began to put weight on the foot, standing between two beds and supporting myself chiefly on my hands, and by the end of the month I could stand unaided for about seven seconds, a very long time.

The first consignment of Red Cross books arrived, and I was made Librarian. From now until we left the hospital there was never a dearth of reading matter, although we often had to read bad books when we had read all the good ones in the hospital and were waiting for the next consignment to arrive. The first private parcels began to arrive for people, among them being one or two book parcels, and it was a book which arrived in one of these, *Seven Tempest* by Vaughan Wilkins, that pleased us most. Certainly amongst the officers, it was regarded as the best book which found its way into Italy.

Our relations with the Italians were now excellent, thanks to the senior M.O. and the senior patient, and in spite of Mussolini's hate speech against British prisoners the interpreter officer did all he could for us, interpreting the rules as generously as possible without ever infringing them. We were able to buy small amounts of Marsala wine, which was officially limited to officers of field rank but somehow found its way under the beds of the junior officers.

The "black rat" strongly disapproved of this wine business, and whenever he saw a small tumbler of wine on a bedside

locker, a dark look would come over his face and he would say hypocritically in sepulchral tones, "What's that you've got theré, boys? Wine?" Then he would wobble out, with his cold grey eyes set forwards in his evil and blankly urbane face. Usually he would go into the troops' wards, where the men soon learnt to get the better of him in the malevolent exchanges of remarks which he began. One day he was talking with a man who had just received his Red Cross parcel before his departure to camp, and pointing to the packet of tea, he said, "Not much of that in England now, is there?" Back came the reply in the same deep matter-of-fact tones, "Well, there's none in Italy, is there?" The black rat never rose to a bait. He would get in his barbed shaft, and if he was worsted he would shrug and pass on to a bed out of ear-shot, while if his remark were taken lying down he would stay and consolidate his victory, laughing throatily and looming over his victim. As things went worse and worse for the Germans, how he must have seethed under his mask of urbanity when his eyes met the triumphant mocking eyes of all those hated British prisoners, staring up at him from their white beds. One day I found a glorious thing in the *Popolo d'Italia*, a picture of two German Mark IV tanks knocked out and with their tracks off, with the caption, "Anglo-American tanks destroyed by our forces in Tunisia." I called to the black rat as he was passing and told him there was something I did not understand in the paper. When I told him that they were German tanks, and that I knew as I had been fighting against them for nearly two years, he merely shrugged and said hollowly, "That's strange!" before going away. He was always very particular to tell us what a life of priestly abstinence he led, and fostered the illusion by refusing anything that was offered him with a fat upraised hand and a gloomy, "Thanks, I never touch anything between meals, boys!" It is hard to see why he pretended to us that he lived on soup and bread, with "Just a little chicken on feast days, boys," because the good things seen on the tray which was carried up to his room for every meal were the envy of the hospital.

For many weeks there had been desultory activity in the

small square area where the troops were allowed to exercise. The trees along the whole of one side were shorn of their branches, and before the other trees had shed their leaves the outline of a shack emerged from the piles of unseasoned wood and corrugated iron. The roof was put on the building just after three days of mist and rain. This was the place which was prepared for the British medical orderlies whom we had been expecting ever since the removal of the Italian orderlies to Russia and Greece. We had all been so much more ill and in such need of proper medical orderlies when we had arrived that they seemed superfluous now that we were mostly fit and strong and merely incapable. However, they arrived, and at once we began to notice the difference in the administration of the hospital. Apart from keeping the place spotlessly clean and always being available for their duties, they brought a new zest in living into the hospital, encouraging the inveterate card players to go out in the warm sun, carrying bed-patients into the garden on fine days, and bringing their talent and ingenuity to bear on the evening entertainments and lectures. These men were New Zealanders, and came from the two New Zealand field ambulances captured near Sidi Rezegh over a year before. To see them on parade before their weekly walk was to imagine that they were a drill squad passing out. They were always neat and clean in appearance, shaving regularly, keeping their hair cut and brushed, and wearing their time-worn battle-dresses correctly and with creases in the trousers. They had all suffered and lost much weight through malnutrition during the period immediately after capture, and even now, although they were no longer the abject skeletons they had been, none of them were in their normal state of health. At the hospital they had the same food as the Italian garrison, which was not nearly as good as ours, although of course, like us, they had their weekly issue of Red Cross parcels. They lived, as I have described, in a damp building in cramped conditions. Here was a group of men who had been exposed for over a year to bad food, bad living conditions and the decaying spiritual influences of P.O.W. life, and yet retained self-respect, discipline, joie de vivre, and all the neces-

sary qualifications for looking after wounded and sick men, such as patience and the capacity for taking pains.

Snow. For some weeks we had been watching the distant horizons, the far glistening peak which overpeered the hills to the north, the steep mountain which rose from the valley to the north-west, and the low rounded hills to the east, for the change of winter. The distant peak had shone whitely for some time, the mountain at the end of the valley had recently gone a little pale towards the summit, and now the little hills which had been purple in the dawn appeared one morning capped with white smudges. The morning was scintillating and clear, but the afternoon was overcast with great bolster-like clouds, all ready to split and drop their feathers on us. When we were discussing the prospect of snow with the suora she was intrigued to discover a South African pilot who had never seen it, and she marvelled and waved her minute hands towards the mountains while saying to him, "Neve! Neve domani!" Night came, and with it the silence of the snow, muffling the town in a sleepy uniformity, after which the clusters of morning bells rang us into a white and beautiful world, and the suora rushed in as the orderly was letting up the blinds, bearing high in front of her a large china cup full of snow to the bed of the man who had never seen it.

I took to having myself carried down into the exercise area whenever the sun was shining after lunch. This exercise area for the officers was a cinder path forty yards long and four wide. On one side was the barbed wire, beyond which were sentries every fifteen yards, and at the other was the eastern side of the hospital with a dried mud pitch for Italian bowls, a game everybody loved for its combination of luck and skill. There was a building of flats (the one behind which the man with the black hat and cape vanished so mysteriously) whose occupants used to survey us through field-glasses from a hundred yards range. In these flats lived a small boy called Angelo who was always getting into trouble, or else his mother could not bear him to be out of sight, for we used to hear her calling his name all day in her brass contralto voice. Some-

times we would hear an outburst of weeping from Angelo, which was often followed by a song from Mrs. Angelo, whose voice was tuneful and sufficiently powerful to reach us. There was also a girl child in the building whose voice reached us, but generally these people preferred to play their gramophone, for which they had a few very ordinary popular records, rather than sing themselves. The road which gave us our only contact with normal life could also be seen from here, and now that it was winter and the lower sashes of the windows upstairs were usually shut, we became more used to this view of it. Straggling lines of Italian soldiers used to filter past sometimes, amusing us by their presentation of militant Italy on the march. They did not keep in line either from front to rear or left to right, one group of them sang one song and one group another, some had bicycles, they wore various types of head-gear and those with the same type wore them differently, they walked arm in arm sometimes, and the speed was about two miles an hour. I remembered once, as a schoolboy in Somerset, meeting Cotford lunatic asylum out for a walk. Many of them wanted to stop and pick flowers from the roadside, while others took an intense interest in passers-by, peering after them and not even being conscious of the other lunatics who were urging them on from behind, and all the time the harassed nurses and warders were trying to keep them together. This comparison is not exaggerated.

Half-way through December the repatriation commission visited the hospital, and I was put on the list. For a few weeks rumours that repatriation was imminent flew round in the wintry air, seeking to disturb the fixed mental calm at which we had arrived by now, but we kept our emotions balanced by reiterating the formula, "We don't give a clap or a cheer until we see a British flag floating from the stern of a ship that we're on." At length the Italians came to us and said that our government had postponed the exchange indefinitely, and that they were sorry because they seemed to want the exchange much more than the British. We surmised that the British wanted to clear up Africa before bothering about a small detail like the exchange of wounded prisoners, and we

settled more cosily into the steadily brightening tranquillity of our existence.

Preparations for Christmas were undertaken in determined fashion by the whole hospital, and the two senior officers turned their clear relations with the Italians to good account in the matter of "lights out" extensions, extra meals, a beer issue for the troops (paid for by the officers) and extra shopping facilities for the officers. The Red Cross Christmas Parcels arrived on time, but owing to the arrival of a new batch of patients there were four Parcels between five instead of one each. We were hard at work preparing an evening's entertainment for the officers, and the troops' concert party was busy preparing a hitherto unknown version of *Cinderella*. For rehearsals we used the M.O.s' mess, an area in a passage screened from the rude multitude by a planked partition with a door in it. It was arranged that the officers should have their party on Christmas Eve and the troops theirs on Christmas Day.

The morning and afternoon of Christmas Eve in the officers' ward saw much mysterious preparation of food. Jellies were left tucked away on cold and draughty ledges where it was hoped they would set, raisins and nuts were poured out of their containers and mixed, biscuits were being pounded soggily in soup bowls ready to form a base for the trifle, and previously hoarded wine rations disappeared into nameless masses of coloured foods. Cheese and sugar tins were cleaned, and had their sharp tinny edges bashed down with heels of shoes and tin-openers so that they could be used as ash-trays, and the tables were set on three sides of a square in the middle of the room. There were holly and paper decorations, making the scene very gay. The suora flitted in and out, very intrigued at the preparations the poor prisoners were making for Christmas.

The evening arrived, and I was carried to the table. The chickens we had managed to buy came in surrounded with sausages and steaming, and the jollity, which had all along been out of proportion to the amenities, bubbled over. During the meal the suora arrived with La Superiora, both wearing

their best black dresses for the occasion, and the senior officer, who knew no Italian, read out a speech of thanks for the wonderful care they had taken of us, before we drank their health. The suora blushed beneath the pale skin of her tiny face, and after a few words from La Superiora the two little figures glided to the door with their huge black skirts billowing behind them and their small hands folded in front of them, turning at the door to smile again before disappearing. A few minutes later the Captain of the Guard, one of the more pleasant officers, came in with his retinue to wish us a happy Christmas, and there was more standing and clinking of glasses.

After dinner came the variety show, the chief item of which was the scene from *King Richard III* where Clarence is murdered. The blank verse was rewritten farcically to make it plain that the murder was being done because Clarence had stolen more than his share of the marmalade left to the family by its "princely father York", and the scene ended with Clarence's body about to be cooked and eaten.

The sketch was a success, but drew forth nothing like the delighted guffaws which greeted our caricature of an Italian doctor which appeared in a short sketch of P.O.W. hospital life. The show ended with a song and chorus about the end of the war to the tune, "Oh, dear, what can the matter be?" Coffee was then miraculously served, having been prepared on the stove by some public-spirited person during the latter part of the show, and we all went to bed as happy as sand-boys.

Christmas Day stole whitely upon us a still misty day whose atmosphere was thriddled with the sound of bells, for every bell in the town seemed to be ringing, golden bells and silver bells, clusters of bells pealing and single bells tolling, bells pursuing devotional tunes and bells creating and then rejecting harmonies. Everyone in the officers' ward went to church in the morning, and I was left alone with the ringing bells and the adoring choirs of the town, the steady singing of voices pursuing the gladdest English hymns and the rising and falling chant of psalms.

It was the end of a year whose first half had ended with a

stroke that had knocked me to the bottom of a dark pit, and it had taken me the remaining six months of the year to climb to a point where I could see the light and the sky beyond. All around were the glad thanksgiving bells, and under their ægis I and many others looked forward with calm certainty to a radiant and successful Nineteen Forty-Three.

XII

THE EIGHT QUIET MONTHS

(ii) *January–March 1943*

January, 1943. The year opened with the fall of Veliki Luki to the Russians and the occupation of Misurata by the Eighth Army. The weather was damp and cold, with rain after the snow, and the thirteen officers, all that were left, huddled about the radiators or sat at the table wrapped in blankets to play patience, monopoly, or chess. Reading was done mostly in bed in the afternoon, because when it was time for the lights to be switched on, the sheen from the bulbs only illuminated the table properly, casting an orange twilight against the walls and into the corners of the room. At most times of the day we could see our own breath.

On New Year's Day, when the bells were ringing into the still foggy atmosphere in an even more haphazard and continuous concert than on Christmas Day, during the morning I stood as usual between two beds holding on and exercising my foot and leg. They always went blue and mauve when I exercised them, and I never did more than a quarter of an hour at a time; but this morning, whether it was the fact of its being New Year's Day or the effect of the peals of bells on me, I thought some big new advance was imminent. So I had Bill's crutches brought over to me, the idea being to stand with them and discover the trick of balancing. No sooner were they under my arms than I thought how grand it would be to move of my own accord, so with one man behind and one man in front of me I set out, and got round the room without mishap. It had never occurred to me, and no one had ever told me, that it was possible to walk on crutches before one could stand on the one leg unaided, so that the surprise and joy of achievement were double what they would have been if I had begun walking according to schedule, that is to say some time in March.

Within a few days I was walking about without supervision, although only for a short period twice a day, and life's horizons moved miles away as I found that more and more things previously denied me were now within my reach. I could go for short walks in the exercise area instead of sitting and watching the pairs and threes of officers walking up and down, up and down, and wondering what they were talking about. If any snowfall, cloud formation, rain curtain, sun glory or mist transfigured the valley or mountains, I could go and lean on a window-sill and watch it. Anyone who has been bedridden for six months without privacy of any kind can imagine what it was like to be able to use a lavatory again.

Learning to walk had its pitfalls. One day in the garden I lost my balance, and when I was falling I instinctively put out my non-existent leg to save myself, thus taking the whole impact of the fall on the end of my stump. Although the new skin was neatly knocked off, there was no pain as there was little sensation at the end there, but the shock to my nerves of putting out a leg that wasn't there to save myself made me feel quite ill. The doctor said that I would do the same thing six more times before my subconscious self finally realized that there was no leg there, but he was wrong, for I never did it again, and if I fell again, I fell scientifically.

There was another heavy snowfall followed by days of warm sun, and although we could sit on the downstairs balcony and sun-bathe, only those few who possessed boots could walk along the narrow black path between the huge snowballs which energetic people had made, and bowls was out of the question. The only place where we could walk when the ground was wet was the raised stone promenade about thirty yards long which ran underneath the windows of our ward along the top end of the troops' exercise area. Here, when the disappearance of the sun below the roof of the western wing of the hospital drove indoors the troops, the officers usually took their serious exercise in the last cold hour of daylight between tea and supper. Here, one day about a fortnight after I had first walked round the room, I walked half a mile without stopping.

One day—I remember it clearly, it was the 17th January—I helped to do some frying of Canadian meat roll (Spam to England) on the stove at tea-time, and while we were watching the stuff sizzling I swung about on my crutches in time to a tune that was going on in my head, feeling that I needed nothing more to complete my happiness, for the discovery of rhythm in my movement on crutches gave me back spontaneity of action. After our meal, still in the flush of this discovery, I went down to the troops' exercise area and began walking up and down through the damp still mist, which was so thick that the roof of the hospital appeared hazy, and the Italian barracks two hundred yards away were invisible. The air was so damp that my hair got wet, and clusters of moisture formed on my face. In that quiet world I walked back and forth for some time. Suddenly, as I was walking, there came a loud crack in my left leg, and it gave way. In the instant of falling I thought that I must be careful not to let my leg buckle under me and so displace the newly broken bone, and I took all the weight on my right side, falling rather cleverly I thought, so that I ended up with the left leg lying perfectly straight on the ground.

The next day it was put in a new plaster right up to my thigh, for ten weeks, so the doctor said. It was very cold for thirty-six hours until it dried, as there were no drying facilities and I could hardly sit on top of the radiator all day and all night. Back to bedpans and immobility! I was the perfect passenger once more. It was not the British doctors' fault, nor was it mine, as I had not been fooling about when the fracture occurred. It was the fault of the Italians, who had not allowed the leg to be X-rayed when the British doctors had asked permission for an X-ray at the time when I was beginning to put weight on the leg five weeks before.

For two days I cast about, sometimes persuading myself that it did not matter as I was a prisoner and would not be allowed to walk far in any case, and sometimes wondering what on earth to do with myself. But on the third morning, when people were exchanging drowsy remarks over morning coffee, someone said that what we needed was a newspaper.

At once I jumped up in bed and said I would run one, and from then on I was never at a loss for something to do.

The paper came out every Saturday. It became the record of the nursery fantasy life we created to compensate for the absence of events in our real lives. This fantasy life marched in our days parallel with our consciousness of the changing situation in the great outside world, and was taken seriously by all of us. We usually addressed each other by our fantasy nicknames for a large part of the day, and much time, brain-work and paper were devoted to the creating of his character by each officer in the ward. The nonsense was endless. But we were only ten officers, who had been living together in the same room for six months, and our mental energies, deprived for so long of their normal proclivities, had to find some outlet as well as expending themselves on the trivial details of our everyday life.

After a long confinement, sick people nearly always begin to attach disproportionate importance to the tiny details of the administration of their sick life, suffering disappointment if a tit-bit of food is denied them, and irritation at a neighbour's habit of whistling, or going to fantastic lengths of emotion and labour to get a drop of hot water. On the whole we did not suffer badly from this, although there were occasionally friction and pettiness; for example, there was feeling over the suora's distribution of eggs and other favours, and a little irritation about the sharing of wash-basins with the doctors. The officers were a good lot. In any case the morale of surgical cases in hospital is always higher than that of medical cases, while all the time we were buoyed up by the continuous influx of good news.

This month several private parcels arrived, and people began to sport individual garments and lay in large stocks of chocolate. Scarves and pullovers were the most prized commodities which came, and nearly everybody had something to wear on his daily walk.

With the fall of Tripoli we felt that the writing was on the wall, and Bash jubilantly shaded in a huge piece of his map and labelled it British North Africa, while the Italians began

sorrowfully passing rumours among themselves, some of which reached us. Italian rumours were always unfavourable to the Italians, while British rumours, at least in my experience, are nearly always favourable to us. It is just a difference in mentality. The rumours we heard at this time were that the Italian Eighth Army had been destroyed on the Russian front, and not withdrawn as the papers stated, and that Turkey had come into the war against Italy.

February. Our world of make-believe went on as before. The most exciting event of the month was a rat hunt at which the quarry was pursued with mediaeval ferocity and mediaeval weapons. We knew that when the french windows were opened after lights-out a rat climbed up the creeper outside and made its way into a disused stove behind a cupboard, where it fed on the biscuits and things it had stolen from people's lockers. One day we cleared out the food treasure, and made sure that the room was rat-proof except at the open french window beside the padre's bed. After lights-out we all waited for the rustling of the rat, and the moment it came the padre leapt out of bed, shut the french window and turned on the light. All active people tumbled out of bed, hitching up their white "mutandi" (long pants) and gathering weapons such as crutches, slippers, walking-sticks and boots. The cupboard was shaken and the rat dashed out into a barrage of missiles, running so fast that he was almost invisible in the orange glow of the lights. No one saw where he went, and although the room was rat-proof the hunt came to a standstill. The cupboard was searched again, and a mouse found cowering there was destroyed without ceremony. At last from the door came a shout of mingled fear and recognition, and we turned as one man to see a fellow with one shoulder in plaster reaching high up a window with a crutch. The rat climbed between the shutter and top window which was opened inwards, and crouched there looking down at us through the glass. Pressure on the window persuaded him against remaining there to be squashed messily, and he walked to the end and plunged fully ten feet down into the crowd. There were loud cries of "Damn! I've missed tread-

ing on him!" as the rat rushed safely into the haven of his cupboard, and those of us who were watching the hunt from our beds laughed cynically as we thought of the joy of treading on a rat with bare feet. He was frightened out of his retreat again, and ran rather slowly across the open, actually passing between the padre's white-clad legs. The padre was accused of cowardice, but strongly defended himself, saying that the quarry had changed direction just as he was about to tread on it. The rat was by now a very tired rat, having sustained several direct hits in mad rushes round the room as well as his desperate leap from the top of the french window, and after being harried ruthlessly for a few more minutes he was caught between a cardboard box and a door and bashed to death with the heel of a slipper. He was then carried to the waste-paper basket, where he lay in state for the rest of the night.

The next morning the suora fled at the sight of the dead rat and would not come in again until it had been carried outside. Every morning for about a week after that, when she came in behind the trolley with the coffee, her first remark, as she stood apprehensively with one little hand on the door and the other fumbling nervously with her crucifix, was "Topo stamattina?" (rat this morning?).

The year was moving on into the early spring. The radiators were no longer heated, and we were able once more to have supper by daylight instead of under the dull electric light. News from Russia was a pageant of sacred names, and the custom, inaugurated by one enthusiast, of everyone smoking one of his cigars when there was an important success, began to cost him rather a lot of the precious cigars he had received from England. This month, in rapid succession there were Kursk, Rostov and Kharkov, all big victories.

After I had broken my leg the second time I took to going to the concerts which were held in the troops' wards. Every night there was some sort of diversion, a talk, discussion or community singing, and about once a week there was a variety concert organized by a Cockney comedian who had been

captured with his R.A.S.C. unit when Tobruk fell. I warned the orderlies on an evening when I wanted to go, and they took steps to secure one of the two stretchers which were all the hospital boasted. Then I was carried in about twenty minutes before it started, and put right at the front of the crowd, which was already packed thickly on the beds and floor and filling the air with the hubbub and catcalls and smoke peculiar to all troops' concerts. After a while one of the organizers came in with the high-power bulb which was kept specially for evening concerts, and substituted it for the dull one at the stage end of the room. Without this bulb the troops' wards were so dimly lit that after black-out it was impossible to read. Shortly before the start the officers filed in, each with his light blue metal stool over his shoulder and a white pillow under his arm, and when the performers had finished all their whispering and crossings-out and rewriting on their little bits of paper, the Cockney took charge of the proceedings.

The show usually began with community singing, led by one of the popular vocalists, who often stirred us up by making one half of the room sing against the other; and then we caught the eyes of friends on the other side and bellowed so mouthingly that they forgot which song they were singing. Next there came a sentimental singer, who stood with one hand in his pocket and the other on the radiator, looking far away at some dream vision above the heads of the people at the back, and slurring over the notes of some endless waltz with many sad warblings and takings of breath in wrong places. This type of song was always appreciated, so that it was possible to have three or four such singers whose voices were much the same all performing on the same evening. Some had a speciality of being able to trickle off their high notes into still higher notes of falsetto, and some stuck so hypnotically to the rhythm that the words fell out of their mouths expressionlessly and senselessly, while others entirely forgot the rhythm in the weaving of their sentiments, and confounded the accompanist. In contrast to this there was a very small and well-built man with a large nose, known as

Battling Bill because of his ring reminiscences, who had a crashing baritone voice. He stood in the middle of the stage with feet apart and hips firm, head and shoulders back, chest out, and launched forth on a series of heroic and passionate songs. He was always encored, and while the applause was going on he wrestled to lubricate his mouth and expand his lungs, so that I always expected someone to rush out with a bucket of water and sponge his face and fan him with a towel, and undo the top button of his shorts so that he could breathe freely. After a short pause and a deprecating acknowledgment to the crowd, he returned to the attack, and his voice set up an enormous volume of sound on the high notes, ringing through our heads, until the carotids stood out on his throat and his face became red. Then finally he cut short the most tremendous note of all with a great rhetorical writhe of his body, and retired to his seat, blowing his nose loudly.

Before the great day when the Papal representative had given the hospital a piano accordion, before the time when the Senior Officers' Camp had presented 1,000 lire and enabled the troops to buy a guitar, a violin and a ukulele, a means of making rhythm had become familiar to us, that of holding two spoons between the fingers and tapping them on the knee so that they sounded like metal castanets. There was a man with one leg who had developed this to such a fine art that he performed at practically every concert, and produced, with the accompaniment of the accordion, a virtuosity of sound and rhythm equal to that of a good tap-dancer. He was known as "Spoons" throughout the hospital.

Performers on the guitar and violin had been found, and the guitarist in particular, with his western sentimental songs, was in great demand, although the violinist did very well, especially when he had to play on only three strings after all the spares had been used and no more could be obtained. But the best entertainment of all was given by two Free Frenchmen from Tahiti called Charlie and Louis, who sang their strange nostalgic and aphrodisiacal songs with wonderful expression to the accompaniment of the guitar. The atmosphere became electric when these two set to work, singing in

weird monosyllables, with their eyes brilliant and a rapt intensity on their faces, and the end of their song was greeted with a delighted full-throated roar from the crowd.

At the end of the concert we sang "There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover" instead of the National Anthem, because the Italians did not allow us to sing "God Save the King", "Land of Hope and Glory", "Tipperary", or even "The British Grenadiers".

At one of these concerts, when I was sitting in my place waiting for it to begin, I saw a familiar face and called out to the owner. It was Corporal Jackson, who had been Geoffrey Rawlins' gunner on the fateful day, and whom I had thought to have left dead on the ground between the two tanks. He was now quite fit, having recovered from burns on his legs. He told me one or two things that had happened after our four tanks had been hit. He had been dragged by a German into a scoop in the ground from where he had watched Geoffrey firing at the Germans with his tommy-gun. After Geoffrey had been killed, the Germans had helped Jackson to carry the tank's wireless operator away to safety, and while they had been doing this a German had been killed by a British shell. It was after this that the Germans had made such strenuous efforts to rescue me, and Jackson's story made me marvel more than ever at the chivalry of my rescuers and my extraordinarily lucky survival.

Towards the end of February the Camp Commandant, whom we had always regarded as a stuffy old farmer-like man and laughed at because of the absurd measures (almost panic-stricken, we thought) he had taken to make sure that the wounded prisoners would not escape, came in one day beaming all over his fat old face and produced in strange accents the words "Good luck. You go home." He had obviously learnt the words from the interpreter officer specially for the occasion, being so glad for our sakes that the repatriation was coming off at last, and we much appreciated this mark of goodwill. We were to leave the hospital by 10th March, he said, and would leave the country between the 10th and 15th April. A fluttering sigh of speculation and revived hope went



THE PARTY FOR REPATRIATION.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FAIR.

round the ward, but everyone was already so determined not to be overjoyed until we really were free that there was very little discussion about it, and only a little more quietness and fewer but louder outbursts of merriment betrayed the fact that we were all a little excited at the prospect of going home.

March. We began to get ready to go, and for a few people there were moments of anxiety until they knew for certain whether they were being repatriated or not. There was an arrangement that the vast majority who could walk were to go by passenger train and the few others were to wait for a hospital train to take them to Lucca, the collecting place. I was a stretcher case, but Bash got the British doctors to agree to my going with the first party, as I was fit and strong enough to sit up on an ordinary seat for a day and a night and would only have to be carried into the train and out of it at the other end. This saved me an extra month in Italy, because the men who were left behind as stretcher cases did not leave the country until the second repatriation, in May.

There was a big repatriation concert, and an even bigger repatriation fair which was run by the New Zealand orderlies. It included a race called the Repatriation Stakes in which the riders were well-known figures mounted on mythical beasts. The progress of the race—prepared and written down beforehand, of course—was broadcast from a window in the orderlies' hut, and at the end the winner was drawn out of a hat. I won on a horse called Barmaid's Delight, and won two hundred cigarettes in private bets as well as a tinfoil challenge cup. The fair boasted a Master of Ceremonies complete with riding-coat, top-hat, white breeches and whip, a Strong Man, a Tattooed Lady, a Red Cross nurse and Pop Eye. Afterwards we went into the orderlies' hut for tea, and here during the meal there was a long and involved altercation between the Master of Ceremonies and the Strong Man, and an elaborate explanation of the designs which covered the Tattooed Woman. The whole affair ended with much singing and a lot of laughter over jokes which would not have raised a smile in normal circumstances. After we left the hospital we heard that the deserving New Zealand orderlies were being

repatriated, too, except for their warrant officer, whom the Italians described as "too young".

The party was over, and now there was nothing to do but wait for our departure. The 10th March came, and the proposed date for leaving slipped back a few days. One of the leaders of our fantasy life had already gone on a separate naval repatriation. It was rumoured that there was a coach waiting for us in a siding at the station, and that there had been a hitch about the numbers of people going, while one rumour that did come true was that the repatriation commission was coming on a final visit. Philosophical officers said that we might as well wait here until the 10th April in a place where we knew the ropes rather than go to a new hospital and spend an uneasy and idle month, but most of us wanted the first move to come as soon as possible to convince us that we really were going home. Towards the end of March the padre and two others went off to camp, with their wounds as good as healed, and only Tom was left of the officers who were not being repatriated.

The last cycle of days was unfolding its serene hours. We had long ago organized our daily routine so that it filled as much of the day as possible, and we were never in a hurry about anything. The act of chewing a mouthful of food, or spreading butter on a roll, or opening a tin, was committed as a contemplative undertaking rather than an unthinking habit. Shaving was a protracted and sybaritish performance, writing a letter of twenty-four lines was an afternoon-long ritual, and when I played patience I took care to lay out the cards in meticulously straight lines, all because the longer I could occupy myself consciously, the more quickly time went. I was always thankful that the only clock in the room was not visible from my bed, for often the loudly clanging bell for meals rang out sooner than I had expected. I conquered time by ignoring it.

Every night, as they had done since what seemed to be the beginning of time, the Italian guards and orderly officer clumped through the ward. Their hobnailed boots scrabbled on the stone floor even when they went on tiptoe, their stage

whispers intruded past our protecting aura of sleep, and the light they switched on to count us made us heave the bedclothes between our closed eyes and the glare. Sometimes the officer did not switch on the light, but went round to each bed with a bright torch, apparently to make sure that none of the incapacitated people had been spirited away. In our early days at the hospital, when sleep had been jarred and distorted by the tyrannical concert of pain, these noisy visits from the guards had provided comic relief for the purgatorial bedlam of our nights, but now they merely gave us opportunity for irresponsible complaints and carefree laughter, so that often the whole ward was awake for five minutes after their departure, muttering and sniggering.

During the last twenty days of March the paper was not published, and our little dream world faded before the advance-glow of real life, which threatened to burst over us in a stupendous sunrise superior to any other event of our lives. We read more, played more cards, sat browsing longer each day in the strengthening sun, and the only activity which lasted from the old make-believe days was the betting. Every day after lunch I used to drag a mattress off one of the many empty beds and put it on the floor by the open french window beside my bed, and play patience in the sun that shone warmly there for about two hours in the afternoon. Sometimes a light wind would blow the cards about and turn them face downwards, but I was never worried, as I had all day to play in. I found that I became a master at passing time in a relaxed and contented mood, and spent all day in quiet occupations and all night in restful sleep as if I were serene under the influence of some natural benediction.

Two of the last books I read broadened the wide peace into which I had drifted. One was Howard Somervell's *High Conquest*, which took me round the world and up its highest mountains, and the other was Taylor Caldwell's *The Earth is the Lord's*, which took me back several centuries into the tale of a fantastic conquest, and with the brilliance of its language planted firmly in my mind some unforgettable scenes and episodes—a herd of goats pouring between two yurts and

backed by the setting sun, or Genghis Khan alone in the desert surveying a mirage.

One day when I was sitting on my mattress enjoying the warm sun, the barber came up to cut my hair, and while he was doing it he told me his story. He was one of the prisoners who had spent three months in Africa after being captured, and had been quickly undermined in health by the appalling food and lack of sanitation. Now after four months in hospital dealing with dysentery, he was more or less fit again, and said that as a result of the good food and treatment he had received in Italy he did not feel nearly as bitter towards the Italians as before. However, he was one of many dysentery patients I met who were determined to be in the Army of Occupation in Italy after the war.

At last, when news had filtered through to us that repatriation cases had been collected at Lucca from all the other hospitals, making us think that we were all going to be kept back for the second repatriation, the order came to move, and we packed our belongings quickly. I was issued with a battle-dress, and felt very strange when I was dressed again, after nine months in a hospital shirt. It was a dull misty day, the 30th March I think, a day whose still warm air emphasized the quiet disorder of the soon-to-be-abandoned room, whose beds were all stripped, with mattresses rolled up haphazardly and piles of blankets and sheets on the floor. The waste-paper basket had overflowed on to the floor, and every locker was bare except for a few empty tins or scraps of paper. It was like the prep. room at the end of a school term. We idled expectantly, sitting fully dressed on the beds and swinging our legs, or walking up and down smoking, or memorizing addresses so that we could get in touch with relatives of people who were staying behind.

The reign of the bells was over, so much over that I cannot even remember whether they were ringing as usual on this damp misty day. I think the single bell that tolled every morning just before the coffee arrived must have swung its dull clapper the prescribed number of times, but as the day wore on it was not of the bells that I thought. Consciously, I

thought of poor Tom, the only officer who was not coming with us, as he paced up and down with his right arm perpetually fixed in front of him, of the vanished life of the books I had read and the paper and concert I had organized, and of the 2,300 games of competitive patience Sandy and I had played in the last three months, while all the time in my head was running a glorious sequence of anticipated joys—journeys, home-comings and launchings-out into a new life of blisses which would be thoroughly appreciated this time.

The suora moved in a controlled frenzy from one room to another, not knowing how to see enough of or say enough to her "poveri prigionieri" who were being torn away from her. She came up to me, waving both her straight little hands in the air, crying out "Capitano! Capitano! Deserto! Deserto!" Then, just before we left, she came round with La Superiore, who blessed each of us, and gave us a small crucifix and the medal of her order. The two small figures, dressed in their best, went round to each bed in turn. They came to my bed, and I saw La Superiore with her serene face and our suora with her little pale face all puckered with sorrow standing there, with quiet moving of lips over a Latin blessing and the rustle of La Superiore's mantle as she lifted her hand, and then they moved on. I watched their small backs moving round the ward, and heard their quiet voices saying the same things as they had said to me and the awkward English voices stumbling over thanks before there came a sigh, and they pattered to the door. As she opened the door for La Superiore to glide past, the suora looked back at us, and we waved to her. We saw her again when we were sitting downstairs and waiting to be conducted to the charabanc, with her little white face peering between two Italian soldiers at shoulder height as she stood on tiptoe to see what was going on.

XIII

"The opening of the prison to them that are bound."

THE journey. At Milan we had to draw the curtains, and I peered through them at the huge glass roof in the hope of seeing some air raid damage, but the small part I saw was intact. We travelled all night and arrived at Florence at five o'clock in the morning. Here we had to change trains, a contingency about which we had not been warned, and an unfortunate one because we had no orderlies with us, and all our baggage and me had to be carried a quarter of a mile by men who were being sent home because of their disabilities. I went on Bash's back through the huge clean station which, the Italian officer informed us, had been built mostly with British capital. (Ah yes? Well, it would probably be flattened by British capital, too.) At Lucca station we sat on the platform in the cool moist morning while the solitary vehicle the hospital possessed trundled back and forth, taking us in relays. At length we, too, took our bumpy little journey through the beautiful old town, a part of whose ancient wall, with a carriageway on top of it, could be seen from the hospital, and when we arrived I was given a fireman's lift for about three hundred yards of passages and stairs which led to a long high room where at least sixty officers were crammed together.

Here I met several men of the regiment, including Harris, Richard's driver of the 2nd June at Tamar, and I was able to get together a certain amount of information about people who had so far been posted only "missing". Among these men I met was the man with one arm whom the colonel had stopped to pick up before his tank had been hit. This man, when the Germans tried to carry out their normal routine of handing him over to the Italians, refused to go, with the result that the Germans took him into their own Red Cross tent and treated him royally. They asked him at once to which armoured division he belonged, and when he refused to

answer they laughed and gave him a cigarette.

It was here at Lucca, also, that I learnt from a Greek doctor something of the behaviour of the Italians in Greece, and hearing that their behaviour there was the same as most of us had found it in the desert, I formed my opinion of the race as a whole. I met and heard of many good, kind and even brave people in Italy, but there can only be one opinion of a nation that permits cowardice and brutality to be the salient characteristics of its army.

There were quiet days of eating, sun-bathing, gossiping and recurring rumour at Lucca. There was an excellent play and a good variety show, and an afternoon of gramophone records when all the classical records the hospital possessed were played—Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, the first movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, and one of Beethoven's Opus 18 quartets. I got two themes from the slow movement of the Unfinished on the brain, and used to sit in the garden humming them, while I watched the sun move round and calculated how long it would be before the shadows of the high trees at the end of the garden would reach me and make me put on my shirt. In the garden there was nearly always a bridge four playing, sitting in deck-chairs with their shirts rolled round their heads in turban fashion and wearing dark glasses, and their lazy forward movements when they picked up the cards and their drowsy calculating voices acted as quiet comments interspersing my happy meditations.

So we were to go by train to Lisbon, and not by hospital ship. We had been wondering why the British were going to be fools enough to allow an enemy hospital ship to pass the Strait of Gibraltar, but now our queries were stilled by the fact that the last people to come into the hospital, a few wounded guardsmen captured at Mareth on the 17th March, had actually seen a long hospital train in a siding at Lucca station. We did not think the Germans would allow us to go along the Riviera coast of France unless all the blinds in the train were down all the time, so we rather hoped that we would go by some other route and would be allowed to look at the country through which we passed. The date was shuttle-

cocked up and down the uneasy days of early April as rumour and counter-rumour flicked to and fro across every ward in the hospital. There was a renewed scare about officers' accounts, which the Italian government insisted had to be in order before our departure, and a major-general and a colonel arrived to straighten out the mess various camps had made of them. The accounts of people from my hospital were in fairly good order, but although I told the Italians that I was satisfied with their figure, the colonel seized a piece of paper, scribbled a rapid calculation, and made me a present of eleven hundred lire. I was charmed. The day of departure, the 13th April, was at last made public, and we were issued with our "Carrozze Letti" tickets amid great excitement. All stretcher cases, including we three officers, and practically all the wounded other ranks, were to go by the first train, and the officers, doctors and medical personnel were to go by the second, which was to follow four hours behind. Concerning the search, the Italians said beforehand that anyone discovered secreting things would not be repatriated, and then when the search was carried out it was most perfunctory—rather a sensible way of doing it, we thought.

Down through the cobbled streets we went, and in the hospital train I was put in a bunk opposite Laurie Hale, another tank man, who was only a stretcher case because a few days before our departure his stump had been re-amputated by the Italians—badly, as it transpired later. We were issued with magnificent American Red Cross parcels, and as we had all saved food from our weekly parcels specially for the journey, and also were sure that the Italians did not intend us to pass out of their hands in a starving condition, we prepared to live in luxury for the five days the journey was expected to take. We bribed the Italian medical sergeant to produce hot water whenever we wanted it, so that we could make drinks of cocoa and coffee. This sergeant was a slight, pop-eyed man with a fiery complexion, and did not raise our opinion of himself by his efforts to calm the one mad Englishman. His method was to punch the deranged man in the face while two other Italians were holding him, and we were very glad that it cost him

a fine black eye before they got the Englishman into a strait-jacket.

There was a triple Italian count to ensure that the whole train-load was present and correct, and then, after much whistling and shouting, the train shuddered, collected itself, and began the sweetest journey in the world. We reached the coast at Viareggio to the accompaniment of a wonderful sunset over a smooth sea, and as the train was jogging through Sarzana and Spezia we were settling down to sleep in the warm atmosphere of sodality which comes at the beginning of all long journeys. The second train, four hours behind us, was caught near Spezia in the R.A.F.'s raid on that port, and one bomb dropped close to it. Alessandria woke us in the night with its clanking points and its hoots and voices, and the morning of the second day made the grimy glass of the windows pale as we lay in Turin station. As we drew out of the city, those of us who were awake amused ourselves counting the signs of bomb damage. In the first half-mile or so I counted eight bomb craters on my side of the railway, and then we ran into a cutting, from which we emerged just outside the town to see three bomb craters in a very green field.

The long pull up the exciting valley of the Dora Ripara began, and the beauty of the Alps towered changingly on both sides of us, presenting mountain after surpassing mountain and scenes pastoral and wild, while over all the high snows and crags spread the blue sky with its galleries of cloud. Then came a mass of rock which the railway did not try to avoid by a cutting or a sideways-boring tunnel, and we began to burrow out of Italy the last few pitch-black miles, in the Mont Cenis tunnel.

Morning at Modane, in France of beloved memory. A long wait during which the French fluttered round us, skilfully avoiding the Italian guards until an Italian patrol was put in a strategical position on the road alongside the railway. We threw bread and other food to the French, and the Italians tried to stop them picking it up, not thinking of preventing us from throwing it out. One Frenchman asked me to have broadcast the fact that the French Red Cross had been for-

bidden by the Germans to get in touch with us, and I passed on the message to our senior officer. Modane was the first place at which any of us had been welcomed for months, even years in some cases, and our spirits surged out in a riotous joy to meet the welcome. It was not only they that brought us happiness, for we gave them in return news, hopes, and inspiration to face the remaining months of the war.

We began the downward journey, and a small boy on a bicycle kept up with us on the road which hugged the railway in this narrow valley, waving and shouting the news to passers-by, a tiny gesticulating figure racing along the bottom of this valley with the towering sides, like a midget vaunt-courier of our stupendous advent. One by one the tremendous horizons fell behind us into the high sky, and the snow became more and more remote, pinnacled only the distant masses. St. Jean and Chambéry showed us their hotels, whose blank faces seemed to say that their time too was coming. There was the beauty of Aix-les-Bains in the afternoon sun, and here the railway wriggled round the margin of the lake, presenting us with fresh views at every bend. That night my brother was piloting a Lancaster on the second Spezia raid, and one engine failed just before he got over the Alps, so that he had to turn back. He circled over the lake at Aix-les-Bains in the moonlight while his navigator was working out their homeward route. Over that quiet lake.

At Culoz we did swift trade with the population, giving cigarettes, food and money for alcohol, but it was the end of open intercourse with the French, because at the next station, Amberieu, we ran into German-occupied France, and saw an elderly squarehead, probably a Great War veteran, pacing up and down the platform. After this, whenever we tried to feed the French, the Italians nervously plucked us by the sleeves and implored us not to do it. One Italian said, "You mustn't throw food to the French, because if you do the Germans will punish our officers, and our officers will punish us. Besides, the French are not allowed to pick it up!"

Night fell, and we passed through Lyon, to awake next

morning in the Loire country, which seemed to me to be very sad and beautiful, forlorn with memories like the gardens at Versailles. We went past miles and miles of slowly meandering rivers and wide green meadows bordered with tall slim trees, and barely a meadow was dotted with cattle, hardly a village moved with any life except old people and children. At Bourges we could see the cathedral, a great congregation of stone looming out of a patchwork town on the side of a hill. At Tours there was a stationary train on the line next to us, and I managed to have a long conversation with two youths who leant out of a carriage window opposite. They were from Brest, and had plenty to say in praise of the Allied raids there, apparently not resenting the bombing in the least. On the question of food they said that there was enough to eat, but that the food was not varied and there was very little meat. I tried to give them food and they tried to give me food. Whenever I spoke to French people I made a point of giving them the best news possible, telling them that the fall of Tunisia was imminent and giving them the figures of dead in the Hamburg raids which had reached us in Italy through a civilian source.

Serenely on jogged the train, past great names, Châtelerault, Poitiers, Angoulême, and as we approached Bordeaux in the third evening twilight of our journey our happiness was stoked by the five glowing fires which were still burning as a result of the Flying Fortress raid on the town during the day. At Bordeaux during the night some sisters of the French Red Cross tried to get in to see us, but as at other stations, they were refused admission. However, we did not mind, as the only things lacking for bed-patients were washing facilities, and we merely felt sorry for the good women who had made such efforts to make our trip comfortable. At one station we had seen a notice which read, "Cantine pour les prisonniers repatriés," but nothing had come of that, either.

After a stay of some hours in the high, dirty and unfriendly station at Bordeaux, where our efforts to sleep were much disturbed by the noise that was going on outside and the frequent visits of the Italian orderlies to make sure that the blinds were

covering the windows properly, we started off in the early hours of the morning down the flat province of Les Landes, and arrived at dawn at Bayonne. Soon we saw the sea, and looked out on a sky full of the scudding brilliance of a wind-blown sunrise. As we went farther down the coast we began to look less and less at the free blue water, and more and more in the direction where we expected to see the foothills of the Pyrenees, the promised portals marking for us the end of enemy-occupied territory. At last we saw them, variously shaped silhouettes intruding quietly into the miraculous Spanish air we were soon to breathe.

At Hendaye, the frontier station, we had to change trains because the Spanish railways use tracks of a wider radius than the French, and this proved to be a long business which was thoroughly mismanaged by the Italians in their usual style. The Spanish train was not a hospital train, but had some luxurious Thomas Cook's "Expresos Europeos" coaches for the bed-patients and more seriously wounded men. Some of us were loaded on to the most de luxe coach of all, during which operation I foiled a German attempt to photograph me by ducking behind the man who was carrying me pick-a-back, and then the Italians decided they wanted the whole coach for themselves, so we were all unloaded and left sitting on the platform in a very light drizzle which was coming in from the sea. The Germans were very amused at this performance, and a certain amount of winking went on between them and ourselves at the expense of the Italians.

We had quite a long talk with one German soldier, who was doing a turn of base duties after a period on the Russian front. He said it was frightful the way we were bombing their towns and killing their families. We replied with a chorus of Warsaw, Rotterdam, Belgrade, London, Coventry, and he then made this rational answer, "Well, the European towns were military objectives, but as for our towns, you bombed Berlin before we bombed London." What a good German, to say and think exactly what he had been told! We agreed that he was rather a pleasant young fellow, and very different from the usual garrison troops we had seen in France, stolid, brutal

types whom we had even seen frightening dogs at one station, real caricature Germans.

Eventually we were all loaded in the Spanish train, and we started off. I found myself in a comfortable first-class cabin which was just small enough for me to swing about the place using only my arms, and it did not take me long to get washed and shaved for the first time in three and a half days. The restrictions on this Spanish train were much more severe than they had been going through Italy and France, for first of all we were not allowed to look out of the windows at all before passing San Sebastian, then we had to draw the blinds at every station, and were forbidden to speak to the civilians. We were not much worried now by anything, however, and worried still less when we had our first meal in a neutral country, a supper of chicken, spinach and eggs, together with a half bottle of wine—a high rate of striking which was kept up at every meal for the rest of the journey. A mild party of drink and pleasance developed in our cabin, where we were billeting two other officers who were officially living in an ordinary compartment, and the enjoyment increased after an incredible feat had been performed by Guy MacLaren. At one station where we stopped for a few minutes in the darkness he persuaded a Spaniard to give us a large bottle of wine in exchange for two miserable tablets of scentless Red Cross soap. I don't know why Guy should have thought soap so priceless to a Spaniard, unless it was his long training in Italy, where the black market equivalent of a piece of soap was two fresh eggs, but the burning conviction he showed for its worth as he waved it at the Spaniard and chanted his three words of Spanish did the trick, and we were able to settle down to a little refreshment, after which we went to sleep.

It was not long after that I awoke to a hand fumbling across my bed in a locker in the wall, and to my "What the hell?" Guy's voice in answer muttered thickly and concernedly that he was looking for his glasses because he could see bright lights and thought that we were near Burgos, where there was a "lovely cathedral". We all sat up, and Guy, who was almost out of the window, pointed his finger like Cortez and

said, "Burgos cathedral—all lit up!" We feasted our eyes on the marvellous sight of the floodlit cathedral for some minutes while the railway ran in a semicircle and kept it in view for us, and when it had finally disappeared Guy snuggled down in his blankets, chortling sleepily, "Valladolid's on this line, too. There's a cathedral there. Perhaps that'll be floodlit, too."

Next morning when we awoke Valladolid had been left far behind, and it was Salamanca and Ciudad Rodrigo whose names were on the lips of the Spanish and Portuguese attendants. Wellington, a hundred and thirty-four years before, had travelled along the same route in the opposite direction to bring about the discomfiture of Napoleon. At the Portuguese frontier, where there was only a short delay while we changed to a Portuguese engine which burned wood (there being insufficient coal to supply the railways in Portugal) and therefore travelled slowly, we left the wide plains and began zigzagging through a rocky and monotonously abrupt topography which would have depressed us but for the high gust of anticipation that centred all our thoughts on Lisbon.

XIV

RETROSPECT BEFORE FREEDOM

THAT night we stayed at the station of some town in deepest Portugal. It was our last night in captivity, for we were not yet free, being under Italian jurisdiction until we left the train at Lisbon. I looked out on the poor lights of this quiet town and thought of my last three days of freedom, those days between my hurried final visit to Edmond and Nina and my capture on the 6th July.

I had returned to the regiment from Alexandria fully determined that the Germans were not going to break through. I was aware that the next battle was going to be different from preceding ones, because the two sides were in contact all along the line at El Alamein and were restricted in manœuvre by the short distance between the sea and the Qattara Depression. From Amriya, where the regiment had been getting new tanks, half of my squadron had gone the day before to collect a few tanks from a regiment in the desert, and we were to join them when we were ready. We were to start that afternoon, so I spent the morning in between odd jobs writing one letter to Edmond and Nina, and another to my mother in which she says I wrote that I was beginning to lose faith in my own inviolability.

The sand was blowing a little on that stifling afternoon as our little column set off along the desert road. When we had last seen the road three days before it had been choked with east-bound vehicles, because all the workshops and installations had had to be moved back to a safe area, but now there were streams of traffic going nose to tail in both directions under the protecting wings of the R.A.F., for the front had been stabilized and vast projects in dispositions and reinforcements were being carried out.

After going about forty miles along the coast road we turned southwards, crossed the railway at the small Arab town of El Hammam, and struck across the desert in a south-

westerly direction. Apparently there was no urgent need for us at the front, for we stopped travelling just long enough before dark to organize a meal comfortably, and as we now had tit-bits from the shops and street vendors as well as our excellent rations, we all made the best of supper. The air situation was entirely in our favour, I remember, so that, drugged with the irresponsibility and peace of the week which had elapsed since we had last heard hostile explosions, the squadron was a little lax at dusk about extinguishing the large bonfires we used for cooking.

The regiment had not been re-formed during its week out of the battle. It had merely gathered together its scattered remnants and organized them into the strongest possible force, that is to say two weak squadrons. Many men had returned who had been detailed to go with other regiments after taking their tanks back for repairs during the battle, and these had been heartily glad to come back, for men always feel insecure when fighting with strange people, no matter how good their temporary commanders may be. Leslie Potter had returned from a fatiguing spell of looking after Artillery Observation tanks for a Jock column, and had roundly cursed the luck that deprived him of half the leave the rest of us had had. After this reunion, during which many who had been given up for lost returned with exciting stories, there was plenty for us all to talk about, and every reason in the world to linger in the warm friendliness surrounding the bright orange fires that slogged the twilight beside our vehicles.

After nightfall, as we were fully rested and not under battle conditions, we gathered round Richard's staff car through force of habit. He was full of enthusiasm about his new tank, a Crusader, one of three which had arrived haphazardly in a regiment that was equipped with American tanks. It mounted a three-inch mortar and, like a child with a new toy, Richard was planning ways of using it as he sucked at his pipe and snorted into his whisky. He always snorted when he felt strongly about anything, for his determination was so great that it simply bubbled out of him. Whether he was issuing battle orders or giving one of us a ticking off there was always

a confirmatory snort at the end to convince those round him that he meant what he said.

The next day, after a short march during which we passed various headquarters already dug in and with their washing spread on the scrub to dry, we arrived at our rendezvous behind brigade headquarters and found the rest of the squadron. We spent the whole day padding about amongst the soft sandy hummocks and bushes, taking over tanks and reorganizing crews and troops. Richard gave Geoffrey and myself first choice of crews, so I was able to get what I thought was the finest crew in the whole squadron. We were quite ready some time before dusk, and joined the brigade night leaguer just as it was forming up. Here we met the staff of our brigade once more, and seeing them again made us realize, with a sharp jolt, how lucky we were to have had a rest, for these men had been directing battle or movement ever since the 26th May, and on all their faces was a deathly weariness.

Who would be a staff officer in a battle? He may stand more chance than a fighting man of being able to sleep in a bed instead of in a sleeping-bag mattress with rocks, he may have his meals served to him on a trestle table on the leeward side of a vehicle instead of eating them squatting beside a tank, but decisions are for ever being demanded from him by people who all think their problem must be solved before anyone else's, and responsibility is shackled to his soul for every minute of the twenty-four hours. If he makes a mistake the consequences are usually so serious that the whole world soon knows about it, whereas in the dynamic irregularity of the battle-field a fighting man's mistake vanishes in the fluctuating fortune of the next moment. I take off my hat to the successful staff officer.

Undoubtedly the next battle was going to be different from others in our experience, we thought. In the first place we were on the northern part of the front, and were going to "hold a feature" until the arrival of the Australians. Then the desert was somehow different. Here were none of the wide serene spaces which we were wont to roam without regard for distance or other formations. It was all measured out, with

boundaries and prominent features and forbidden areas. One could hardly leave the regimental area without finding oneself among strange faces and vehicles with strange signs stencilled on their doors. The going was bad, the soil was rocky, and the ground was full of aimless depressions and ridges, as if the designer had ruckled the smooth surface in a pettish mood. There were a few Arabs about too, endlessly offering eggs, and odd deserted shacks which littered the unpleasing prospect. There were tracks and notices all over the place, and numerous clumps of dark green scrub, still too juicy green at this advanced stage of the summer to make good fuel. Above all, though, the crowds depressed us, because we were the reconnaissance squadron of the regiment, and could not imagine of what use we could be in close fighting where local manoeuvre was impossible. Positional warfare is the incubus of the armoured force.

The day after we had joined the brigade we began patrolling a ridge behind which the Germans were dug in. It was a relatively quiet day, for the enemy artillery, which never during the battle seemed to have half as much ammunition to shoot off as our own gunners, was sluggish and only fired at one spot all the time I was on patrol, but whenever I poked my nose too far over the ridge I jolly soon heard the vile crack of a fifty-millimetre anti-tank gun. When my turn of patrol was over I went back to the squadron leaguer, which was adjoining the south side of a large gun position of some strange division. Jerry's shells were dropping occasionally amongst our tanks or these guns, presumably with the idea of silencing our gunners, who fired whenever their observation posts out in front saw enemy movement, but all day I did not see a single British casualty caused by shelling.

It was very hot. But Ryder was my driver during those last few hours of freedom, and I drank many cups of the tea he brewed so efficiently, sitting on the ground on the safe side of the tank and discussing with the crew the chances of the next battle, while odd shells dropped around and spread their black and grey smudges on the hot shimmering atmosphere. We had four substantial meals that day, and like all people whose

stomachs are full and whose bodies and minds are well rested, we began to see the events of the world as a performance that was expressly for our benefit. I remember enumerating the opportunities I had had which would never have come to me but for the war, opportunities like my rather hurried tour of northern France, my short stay in Palestine, and my visits to Durban and Upper Egypt. We decided that war was great fun "until you catch your packet".

On my last patrol that evening I listened on the wireless to the heavy squadron, which was shelling the German position a few hundred yards to the north. There was one thing that puzzled our commanders. After every burst of fire from our guns Germans were seen to run about with little white flags which they held high above their heads, and our people, for want of a better explanation, assumed that it was some new German trick and shelled them the more heavily because of it. During my first few minutes as a prisoner the next day I was to discover the use of these "little white flags".

The heavy tanks had a good day's shooting, and at dusk we formed our leaguer with them to the north of the artillery position. As we rumbled in I noticed some Australians with a German fifty-millimetre gun, and was happy to think that in a few hours' time we would be out of this positional warfare nonsense and back on the southern flank where we belonged.

The last night began with all of us sitting round Richard's staff car under the warm stars, cosily sipping whisky and discussing the rumour that now the Australians had arrived we were to be moved away to the south, and when we went to bed we slept soundly until the early hours of the morning, when the rise of the waning moon gave the signal for the R.A.F. to disturb the peace with their engines and shatter the night with their explosions as they unloaded a mile or two in front of us. The night ended in a mist with us bustling and fretting before dawn to deny a ridge to the enemy. Then, in spite of my empty stomach, I was to experience that morning an absurd urge to capture a German anti-tank gun.

After I was taken prisoner Leslie Potter took over my rank and job, I heard later, and Oscar lost a foot, to romp home via

South Africa after a record recovery and start training cadets at an O.C.T.U. Richard led the squadron all through the grim days of Alamein and beyond. His was the first tank of the Eighth Army into Tunisia. I am sure that when the frontier appeared he rang up the leading patrols and told them to stay where they were, then snorted and ordered his driver to speed up. Having crossed the frontier I think he stopped his tank, waited for the crumbling billows of dust to blow away, then drew his body half out of the turret and turned to watch the other boys sail past, grinning and wrinkling his nose in an unconscious attempt to straighten his glasses, which were always getting knocked out of place by his headphones. The squadron went into the city of Tunis with the 11th Hussars.

XV

FREEDOM

At five o'clock in the morning everyone except the bed patients was assembled on the platform at the order of the Portuguese police, who wished the Italians to make a final count of their prisoners here rather than at Lisbon. The Italians produced the wrong total two or three times, much to the annoyance of the Swiss Red Cross representative, who probably wanted to get back to bed and walked up and down flapping his arms to keep warm, saying, "Why are the Italians in charge of this? Everyone knows Italians can't count!"

After a morning of laborious winding through valleys and across hillsides, over little rushing watercourses and under hills, the train chuffed us to a point from which we could see the other side of the Tagus, and a quiet nervous content settled on us all. If I swung on my arms across to the wash-basin in the cabinet for my final wash once, I did it three times, and yet I was still afraid of getting dirty before our great arrival. The plaster on my leg was smelling after thirteen weeks of gentle saturation from the two small holes still open on my shin, and I tried to drown the smell by putting on some potent Italian scent.

Still the Tagus jogged by below, although now it was less of a river than an estuary, where large white sails and the rippling wake of ships curved and slanted across the courses of the sea-gulls' flight. The suburbs of Lisbon began straggling up the estuary to meet us, and the train went more and more slowly as we approached the centre of the town until, on the single line which ran down to the docks, the pace became processional. Along this line were gathered all the idlers of the town, yelling and giving us volleys of "V" signs. So we were gods again.

There were no formalities at the quayside when the train stopped. We were all moved as quickly as possible into the

big new customs house, where the British colony had prepared a welcome for us. There was everything imaginable, food, drink, news and music, but these were of no account beside the gentle kindness and wonder shown towards us by the women. Numbly I realized that I was being treated like an angel who has returned to heaven after being sent to purgatory by mistake, and I found the reality of this sweetness to be greater than my nine months' long dream of anticipation. Faced with this great new joy, I understood what I had been through, and there passed across my mind a rapid succession of painful memories which now I suddenly loved as parts of the grand pattern of my life—the unreal skirmish at El Alamein, the bravery and skill of the Germans who had saved my life, the agony of the early dressings and ambulance rides, the intensity of the existence we had eked out at Tobruk, the gloom of the early days in Italy and the vicious recurrence of pain in my left leg, the dull distant promise of Christmas, the second fracture of my leg and the twilit calm of our fantasy life—all, all leading up to this plenitude of happiness.

We spent only two hours in the customs house before the loading of the hospital ship began. On board ship the ancient plaster was removed from my left leg, which the doctor pronounced mended, though of course I was not to put it to the ground until an X-ray confirmed this. Pieces of bone came out of both the small holes on my leg and also from my stump. I was amazed at the lavish dressings which seemed to me to be squandered on my now tiny wounds, for I had had a long training in Italian economy of bandages and had come to accept the "one dry dressing per week" treatment as a matter of course.

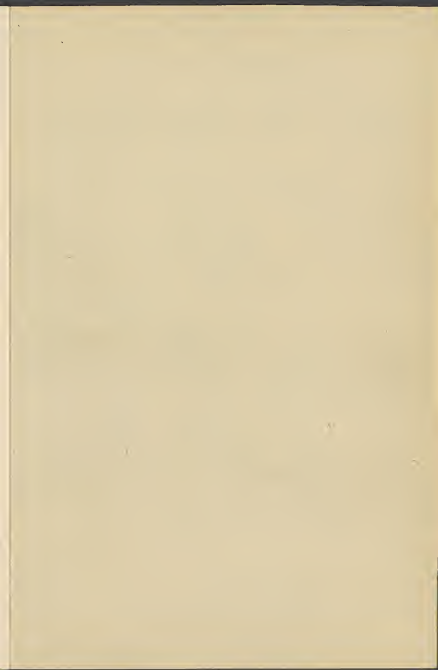
The farce of our arrival at the port began on an overcast morning. First of all the ship went into the wrong dock, and our expectant faces looked out of the port-holes to see a few workmen gaping blankly up at us from among piles of oily rope. When the ship did come to the right dock the repatriated soldiers had to cheer themselves home. Our arrival was so exclusive that no one "unofficial" was allowed on the quay, and the soldiers even had to produce their own music. I

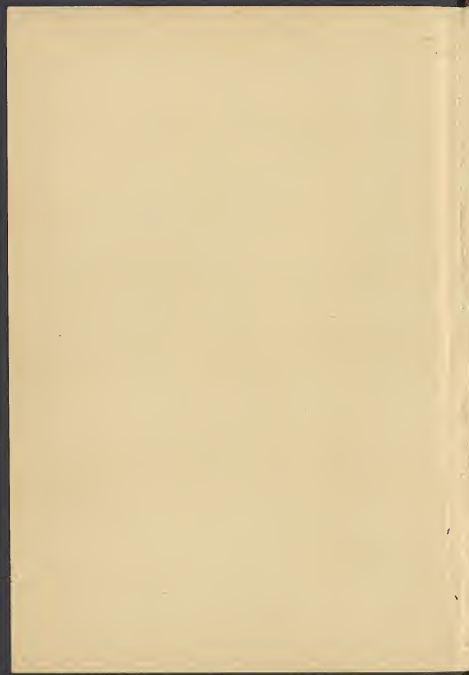
heard many fellows say that they thought from our reception that we had ended up at a German port by mistake.

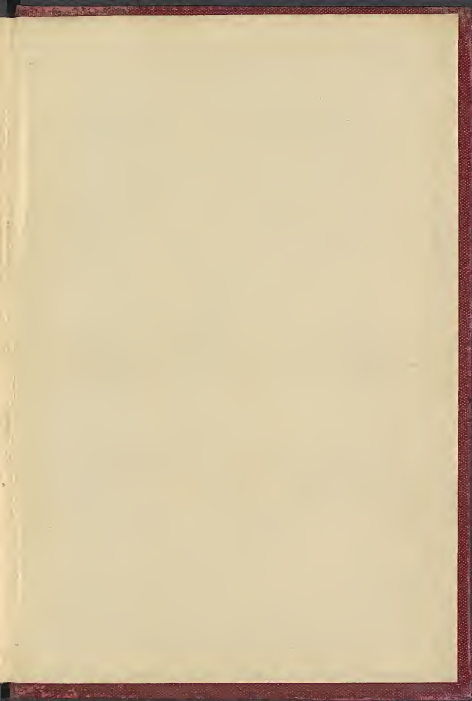
We had been told that the patients were to leave the docks on the two o'clock train, and doctors and medical orderlies on the five o'clock. Evidently this was not correct, as the medical personnel went by the earlier train, and the patients by the later one so that they did not reach Southampton until late at night, in an air raid, as it chanced.

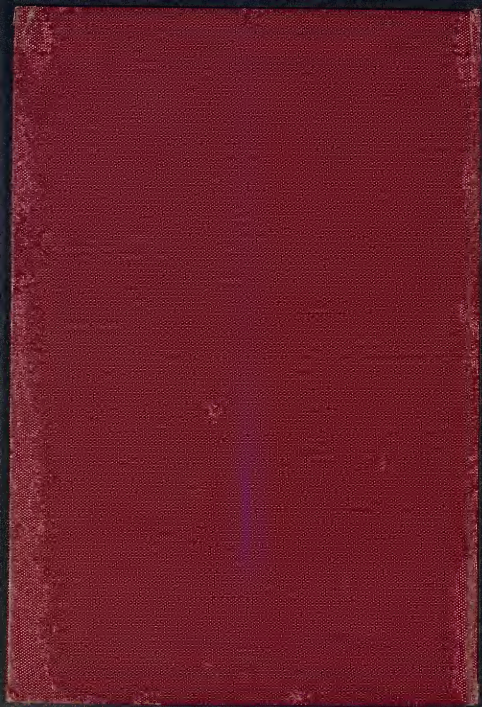
At ten o'clock that night our train rolled slowly into the hospital to the accompaniment of anti-aircraft fire and occasional bombs, but there was a lane of cheering nurses and sisters lining the passage we went through, and a hot meal was served at once. The colonel, who came into the officers' ward beaming all over his face in genuine delight at our arrival, told us that the drum and fife band he had engaged to play us in had only been dismissed a short time before. He said we had been expected to come in time for tea. Over the meal we learnt from the nurses the hours of hospital routine, and heard how such marvels as clothes coupons and the conscription of women affect people's lives. It was strange to look forward to ordinary days once more, for my nine months of captivity had been dominated by anticipation of the paramount day of release—now over. Ordinary days in sweet England, learning to walk with an artificial leg, I conjectured as I snuggled under the blankets in my hospital pyjamas. As if from a long way off, I heard the desultory sounds of the air raid before I fell asleep.











Owing to war restrictions various titles in our SPORTS & PASTIMES LIBRARY, BIRD-LOVERS MANUALS, and other series, can only be printed in small editions. If details are not available at your Bookseller please send us a direct enquiry and we will register your name for copies when reprinted. Please give the name of the bookseller whom you would like us to advise.

H. F. & G. WITHERBY LTD.,
326, High Holborn, London, W.C.1.

BRIAN STONE

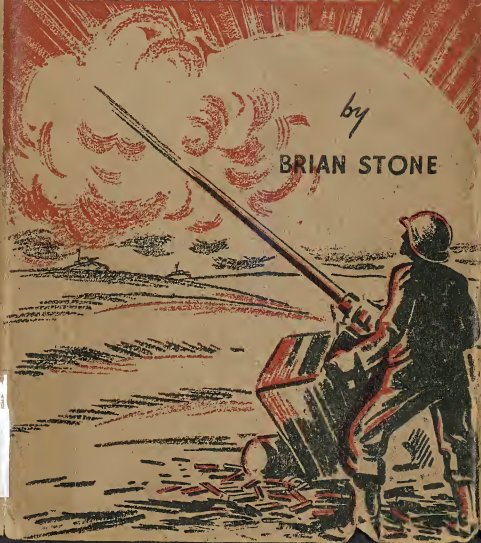
PRISONER FROM ALAMEIN

D
805
.18
STO

WITH RT

Prisoner from ALAMEIN

by
BRIAN STONE



PRISONER FROM ALAMEIN

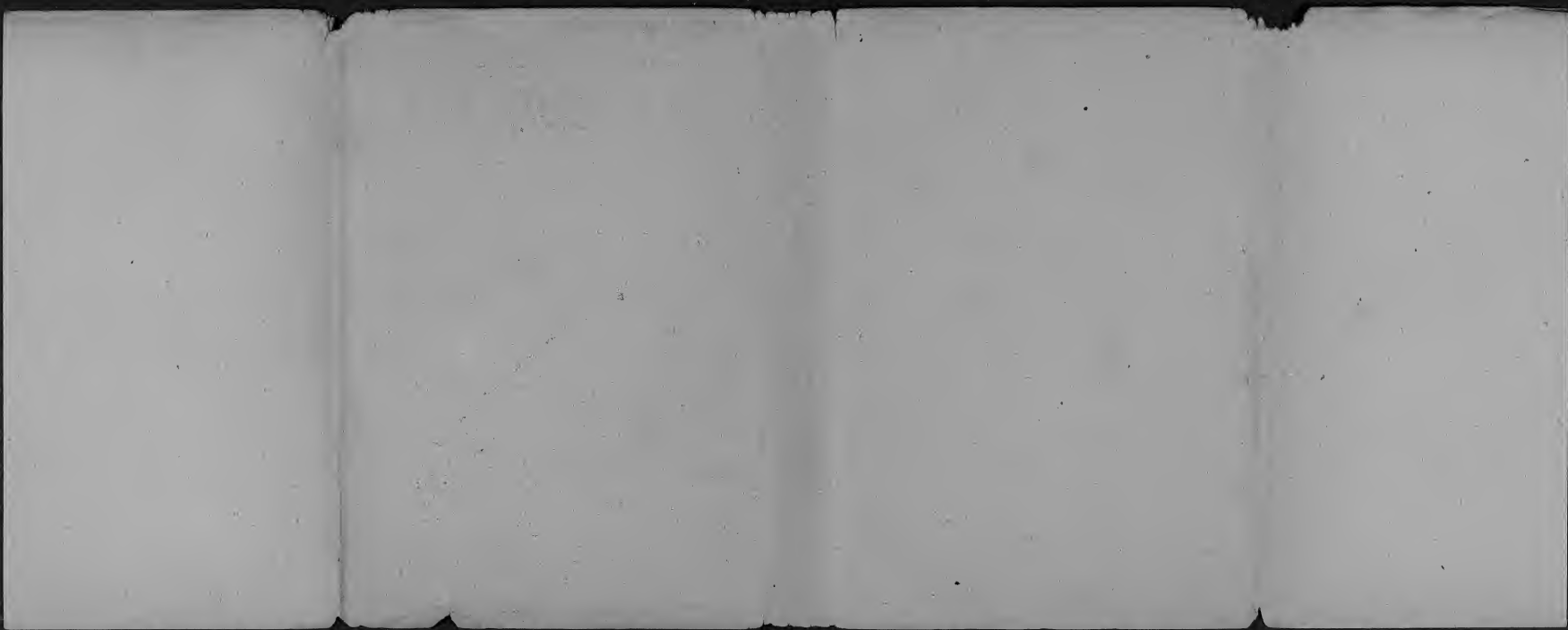
The Author of this book, Captain Brian Stone, describes simply and vividly the desert campaigns in which he took part. The last retreat, from Gazala to El Alamein, culminated for him in his capture by the Germans in July, 1942. Before he was taken by the Germans he lay in one of their gun pits all day, his leg having been shot off during the fighting. These experiences must indeed be read to be believed. The prison-hospital in Italy; the life, if it may be called life, lived by him and his fellow prisoners is observed in great detail and makes a fascinating picture for those who wonder how our men were treated and what their experience was like when wounded and captured.

Neither loss of limbs nor confinement in prison was allowed by these young English soldiers to dim their outlook or change the characteristic vigour of their minds, but how they overcame stagnation is part of the story.

Captain Brian Stone's career as an active soldier began in September, 1939 when he was 19, and from a Territorial Regiment, the Westminster Dragoons he was Commissioned in March, 1940. In early May he was posted to the 5th Bn, Royal Tank Regiment, and went to France. In October he left for the Middle East, where the regiment arrived in time for the first retreat before the Germans, during which he brought the only remaining tank of the Army back into Tobruk.

The book ends on his repatriation through Lisbon in April, 1943. It has an Introduction by Desmond MacCarthy in the course of which this eminent critic says, "As we read we may wonder how humour and alert observation can survive such circumstances; wonder, in spite of knowing that 'It is common.' What is not common, however, is the power to record such things, and to this power I, as a reader of many books here testify."

8/6 net.



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

THE PRINCIPLES OF
JEWELLERY
FROM ANATOMY
AND PHYSIOLOGY

BY
FRANCIS H. BURNETT, F.R.S.

AND
J. H. STONE